

# From Liminal to Liminoid: Eminem's Trickstering

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## Abstracts

Abstract in English:

Eminem's work has been examined under a multitude of academic lenses, often cross-disciplinary. In this thesis I draw heavily on social- and cultural-anthropological theory in reading Eminem's work as modern-day enactments of liminality and rites of passage. Looking at symbols produced in the liminal stage of rites of passage from childhood to adulthood in small-scale societies and in post-industrial societies, along the work of anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, sheds interesting light on Eminem's work. I also argue for looking at Eminem's consciously ambiguous work as evoking the Trickster, a figure central to liminality and prominent both throughout mythology and in Jungian archetypes. Through his modern-day trickstering he assumes a position, through *communitas*, as "charismatic leader" or "ceremony master" for a liminal adolescent following looking for individuation in a life stage characteristically ambiguous, wherein previously taken-for-granted rules and truths become blurred and fall away, and the abiding social structure is questioned. In Eminem's own enactment of a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, the stage of *separation* and stage of *liminality* become apparent, but the eventual stage of *incorporation* is complicated and seemingly postponed endlessly as his fame, a liminoid imitation of the liminal, puts him in a permanent production of liminal symbols.

Keywords: Eminem, Hip-Hop, Rap, Anthropology, Rites of Passage, Liminality, Jungian Archetypes, Trickster, Communitas, Liminoid.

## Abstract in Norwegian

Eminems arbeid har vært undersøkt fra mange innfallsvinkler, ofte kryssdisiplinære. I denne masteroppgaven trekker jeg på teorier fra sosial- og kulturanthropologien i en lesning av Eminems arbeid som en moderne iscenesettelse av liminalitet og overgangsriter. Å se på kulturelle symboler produsert i den liminale fasen av en overgangsrite fra barndom til voksenliv i småskalasamfunn og post-industrielle samfunn, etter modeller av antropologer som Arnold van Gennep og Victor Turner, kaster et interessant lys på Eminems tekster. Jeg argumenterer også for at Eminems bevisste bruk av ambiguitet fremkaller “the Trickster”, en sentral figur i liminalitet og fremtredende både i folkemytologi og i Jungianske arketyper. Gjennom hans moderne “trickstering” fremstår han, gjennom etablering av “communitas”, som en karismatisk leder og “seremonimester” for en liminal tenåringsfanbase i en prosess av identitetsforming og i en livsfase hvor tidligere opplagte regler og sannheter blir tvetydige og faller fra, og den rådende samfunnsstrukturen stilles spørsmål ved. I Eminems egen iscenesettelse av en overgangsrite fra barndom til voksenliv, fremtrer fasene for *adskillelse* og liminalitet tydelig, men den eventuelle fullbyrdelsen og *inkorporasjonen* uteblir, komplisert og tilsynelatende utsatt på ubestemt tid ettersom Eminems berømmelsen, en liminoid etterligning av det liminale, forårsaker en permanent produksjon av liminale symboler.

Nøkkelord: Eminem, Hip-Hop, Rap, Antropologi, Overgangsriter, Liminalitet, Jungianske arketyper, Trickster, Communitas, Liminoid.

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## 1. Introduction

Since his commercial breakthrough in 1999, Eminem has been a force to be reckoned with in hip-hop America. On the topic of critical reception, Eminem has been lauded for his lyrical prowess both within the hip-hop community and by musical and literary greats of other genres. In the book *How to Rap: The Art & Science of the Hip-Hop MC* by Paul Edwards, a number of rappers commend Eminem's skill with words, and his complex rhyme schemes in clear pronunciation, coupled with a wide range of subject matters, often constructed as serialized concepts over several albums. In 2003, *The Independent* reported on Nobel Prize-winning poet, and former professor of poetry at Oxford University, Seamus Heaney's admiration for Eminem, and his "comparing his impact to that of Bob Dylan and John Lennon." Heaney observes that:

There is this guy Eminem. He has created a sense of what is possible. He has sent a voltage around a generation. He has done this not just through his subversive attitude, but also his verbal energy. (Burrell)

In the same article Heaney is supported by acclaimed poet Paul Muldoon<sup>1</sup>, who comments that "one thing [...] about Eminem and rappers in general is that despite the fact that the subject matter is sometimes more than near the knuckle, they do valourise the word in a way that lyricists generally don't. [...] In general, the language is perhaps more important than the music in the rap genre." (Burrell)

Openly gay artist Elton John performed the song "Stan" with Eminem at the 2001 Grammy awards and maintains to this day a close friendship with him, for which he has received flak from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). In the

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<sup>1</sup> Also former professor of poetry at Oxford, from 1999-2004.

*Rolling Stone* feature “the Greatest Artists of All Time” on April 22, 2005, Eminem was ranked number 83, and Elton John, who wrote the entry, claimed that he is

a true poet of his time, someone we’ll be talking about for decades to come. [...] He writes how he feels. His anger, vulnerability and humour come out. [...] Eminem has the balls to say what he feels and to make offensive things funny. That’s very necessary today in America, with people being muzzled and irony becoming a lost art. (John)

In December 2009, Eminem was announced as the top-selling artist in overall total album sales of the decade of any music genre, followed by the Beatles, whose hits-compilation CD simply titled *I* was the decade’s most-selling single album.<sup>2</sup> However, after the 2004 release of *Encore*, with the exception of a greatest hits-collection entitled *Curtain Call: The Hits*, Eminem took a step back from the limelight and publishing, instead focusing on building his own label Shady Records and producing for other rap-artists, notable among them Curtis Jackson, better known as *50 Cent*. After facing issues with drug abuse, leading to an extended stay in rehab, Eminem again entered the sales lists in 2009 with *Relapse*, followed up in 2010 with *Recovery*. Both albums won the Grammy Award for Best Rap Album of the Year, the latter also being nominated for Best Album of the Year, along with 8 other nominations.<sup>3</sup>

Few rappers have engendered such controversy as this white rapper appropriating a black cultural form. As he stated himself in the 2002 song “Cleanin’ out my closet”, he has been “hated [and] discriminated” and “protested and demonstrated against” by prominent politicians and organizations from both left and right, including Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and GLAAD on allegations of among other misogyny, homophobia, racism and corruption of youth. In 2005, Eminem was one of two rappers mentioned in Bernard Goldberg’s book *100*

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2009-12-08-musicdecade08\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/music/news/2009-12-08-musicdecade08_ST_N.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://blog.zap2it.com/pop2it/2010/12/53rd-annual-grammy-awards-nominees-announced.html>

*People Who Are Screwing Up America*, deploring in particular the fact that “the ‘progressive’ elite [has] lent Eminem respectability – even cachet”, which in turn “gives him all the more power to spread his destructive messages” (Goldberg 139). Eminem, like many other rappers, plays on strong emotions and kicks in several directions, forcing people to forge an opinion about him. In turn, opinions like these tend to be polarized.

To understand the position Eminem has in hip-hop, and the criticism that surrounds him, a brief outline first of the historiography of the genre may be useful. To scale the history and historiography of as diverse a genre as hip-hop over the last 40 years is outside the scope of this text (or any text, as Gail Hilson Woldu points out). The following chapter, however, lays out some of the dominant themes related to the genre generally and the artist Eminem specifically. I then want to suggest a reading of his work that to my knowledge has not been done, and which may invite an alternative understanding of Eminem’s art. This is to look at it as enactments of the phases of a rite of passage wherein symbols in and of liminality are produced. Chapter three consequently lays out the framework and theory of rites of passage and liminality, borrowing concepts from cultural anthropology as they apply analogously to postmodern societies. Chapter four further discusses Eminem’s different experiences of family life, and how his role in them relate to transitions from childhood to adulthood and provide the source for the symbols that are produced in liminality. The fifth chapter discusses the correlation between Eminem’s liminal symbols and their configuration in his work and the Trickster figure, a character frequently found in liminality. The trickster, while being a mainspring of potential trouble, can also perform cultural tasks and have didactic functions, such as fostering *communitas* and acting as a kind of leader. As Eminem’s story is ultimately about his individuation, however, bonds of *communitas* must eventually dissolve, as Eminem enacts his own rite of *incorporation*. The sixth chapter consequently discusses in more detail Turner’s conception of the liminal and the liminoid (as imitation of the liminal), and their

complex relation. Eminem's liminal phase is drawn out: the figurative rebirth of his career following his publishing hiatus, overcoming personal crises of drug addiction, coming to grips with the death of his best friend, and a brush with death from an overdose which lead to an appreciation of own mortality all contribute to a partial rite of incorporation. However, with the reviving of his career comes also the rebirth of a remnant of the trickster in the Slim Shady persona. This in turn complicates the effect of his incorporation, possibly even undermining it.

## 2. On the Historiography of Hip-Hop

A fairly young form of cultural expression, hip-hop started in post-civil rights movement New York, and has since become a global phenomenon. While its political content has gone in waves in the USA, it has given voice to marginalized groups in countries such as Germany, France, Palestine and Senegal, as seen in for instance the documentary *The Furious Force of Rhymes* (Litle). The study and analysis of hip-hop has over the years been a collective project shared by three groups of writers: academics, journalists and cultural critics, and what Gail Hilson Woldu calls devotees, passionately opinionated laymen (Woldu 10). The style of writing on hip-hop naturally tends to reflect these people's backgrounds. That is not to say that is the hierarchy, and that one style of writing is more insightful or helpful in understanding hip-hop – on the contrary, the devotees for instance are typically people who have lived the culture, seen shifts and developments throughout the years first hand, and who, to quote Murray Forman, “benefit from an immediacy and proximity to events, detailing transitional forces at the instant they occur” (Forman "Hip-Hop Ya Don't Stop: Hip-Hop History and Historiography" 9).

Much academic writing deals with the origin of hip-hop in New York in the early seventies, with approaches from a number of disciplines. Some describe at length the discursive features of hip-hop as sharing a historic relationship with conventions in Afro-American oral traditions. *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* is an edited collection of 63 articles covering aspects of Afro-American folklore, music, folk speech, verbal art, folk belief, folk narrative and humour (Dundes). Particularly insightful are the articles on verbal art, exploring the competition of the insults game “the Dozen” – a game of ritual insults which lives prominently on in street rap battles – and speech elements such as signifyin', a complex verbal strategy of using doubly signifying language both for ambiguity and humor; toasts, monotone talks over a beat or rhythm, as done by early DJs; boasts, measured use of bragging

and bravado through hyperbole, use of double meaning, inversion and irony; call-and-response, a practice where a speaker/singer actively interacts with a crowd as for instance in gospel and blues, both black music forms – and not least, the Master of Ceremonies (Em-Cee), which is the origin of the rapper as they led the block parties in 70s New York neighborhoods. Musicological and cultural ties have also been made with traditional Afro-American music, such as spirituals, ragtime, jazz, blues and R&B. These aspects are similarly dealt with in *Rappin' and Stylin' out – Communication in Urban Black America*, a collection of essays covering black culture in terms of “nonverbal communication”, “vocabulary and culture”, “expressive uses of language” and “expressive role behaviour”. Insightful articles include among others “Street talk”, “Joking: the training of the man of words in talking broad”, “Rules for ritual insults”, “Signifying, loud-talk and marking” and “Black poetry – where it’s at” (Kochman 205-08; 15-40; 65-314; 15-35 and 36-45).

As pointed out by many scholars, the culture of hip-hop was from the start a communal project, not singularly developed by Afro-Americans, but also Hispanics and other minorities of color. Scholarship on the formative stages of hip-hop describes the different “pillars” of the cultural movement. Sally Banes for instance writes on the rise of “breaking”, and its convergence with “graffiti” and “verbal dueling”. Breaking, at its heart, is essentially a competition in visual display and an exercise in dancing and extreme physical discipline (Banes). Michael Holman connects breaking to dance styles and cultural traditions spanning several continents and two centuries (Holman). Craig Castleman traces graffiti’s rise and evolution in early 1970s New York and its expansion from casual urban youth practice to competitive pastime (Castleman). An interview with three of the “founding fathers” of hip-hop –Afrika Bambaataa, Kool DJ Herc, and Grandmaster Flash – shows their own understanding of hip-hop’s formation. Characteristic of devotees, they give a first-hand account of the competitive environment of DJing, the localizing of commercial markets, and

the development of technology leading to the development of hip-hop's highly appropriative nature (George).

One persistent trope of hip-hop is that of authenticity. From its early beginnings, New York had been the “cradle” of hip-hop, and being from the East Coast was necessary in order to be recognized as an “authentic” hip-hopper. As hip-hop grew in popularity and traveled west, this all changed. In the late 80s a new hip-hop generation from the black neighborhood of Compton, Los Angeles established themselves with great commercial success. A bicoastal war of words developed where the participants argued for their belief that the experiences of people on the one coast, in Mark Anthony Neal's words, “marked them as more authentic [...], more gangsta, more ghetto, more hardcore [...] than those on the other” (Neal 58). The trope of “authenticity” in hip-hop is intimately connected to the experience of being black in urban America, and means maintaining aesthetic, cultural and political proximity to its site of original expression: the ghetto poor. In keeping hip-hop “authentic”, there has also been a preoccupation with keeping hip-hop “underground” and un-commercialized, because of the belief that commodification and commercialization removes the rapper from his/her roots in the urban ghetto and transports him/her into capitalist white American society. Many scholars however seem to share a view of hip-hop as being inherently commercial in nature, in spite of its own cultural obsession with “keepin' it real”. As Alan Light argues, “hip-hop is first and foremost a pop form, seeking to make people dance and laugh and think. To make them listen and feel, and to sell records, by doing so” (Light 143).

In spite of this contradiction between hip-hop as an underground subculture and commercialized pop culture, the obsession with “authenticity” in hip-hop remains. Robin Kelley critiques many social scientists' and urban ethnographers' general fascination with ghetto life, typically at the expense of showing the true diversity of black forms of cultural expression, from jazz and blues to hip-hop. In his view, America's fascination with the

pathological urban poor has translated into massive books sales, which means that both hip-hop artists, the scholars who write about them, and the environment that produced them have a clear commercial stake in representing and perpetuating a very specific “ghetto real” in their work (Kelley). This ties in with a larger tradition of urban ethnographers documenting how the Other lives and what is deemed “exotic”.

As brought up earlier, an important connection to the trope of authenticity in hip-hop is that of locality, such as the ghetto and the ‘hood, as well as the importance of the West Coast vs the East Coast. Central is the circulation of a particular image of hip-hop that, according to Forman, “binds locale, resistance, innovation, affirmation, and cultural identity within a complex web of spatialized meanings and practices” (Forman “Ain’t No Love in the Heart of the City: Hip-Hop, Space and Place” 155). A much-cited phrase in hip-hop comes from MC Rakim’s 1987 song “I Know You Got Soul”: “it ain’t where you’re from but where you’re at”. As Forman points out, however, it seems to matter a great deal both “where you’re from” *and* “where you’re at” (155). Typically, a rapper’s background is articulated and projected through his music, creating stories of the ‘hood or “my block” infused with personal experiences for the listeners to identify with. With hip-hop’s emergence on a global scale, spatial dichotomies within hip-hop include not only the archetypal East-West one, but also the ghettocentric vs. the afrocentric, turning on where “authentic” blackness is located. Reflected within these dichotomies are those of the regional vs. the national within the U.S. and the local vs. the global internationally. In relation to the local vs. the global, Forman points to growing scholarship showing how hip-hop, through becoming part of the everyday practices and experience of international youth, has had its expressive forms combined with their own national and local inflections (Forman “Ain’t No Love in the Heart of the City: Hip-Hop, Space and Place” 157). To summarize, hip-hop is a cultural form of expression well suited for expressing social ills of race and class, a natural given its development in 1970s New York,



more specifically in urban black ghettos riddled with gang problems and crime waves, while at the same time engendering great controversy over issues of race, class and gender.

Eminem's work navigates these themes and tropes in various ways, and some of the existing scholarship on this is outlined below.

## **On the Scholarship on Eminem**

Different critics approach Eminem's work from a plethora of disciplines and ways, with the majority of scholarship done on his earlier works, i.e. *The Slim Shady LP*, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, and *The Eminem Show*. Prominent issues around Eminem involve his success as a white artist appropriating a black art form, his negotiation of whiteness and blackness, his class background and attitudes to gender issues (misogyny, homophobia). Existing scholarship reflects clearly the many different ways Eminem's work is received.

Edward Armstrong, for instance, analyses Eminem's lyrics in what in my opinion is a mechanical and biased manner, counting the occurrences of certain predetermined keywords denoting misogyny and homophobia, not taking into account the music genre's discourse and extended use of hyperbole and irony (Armstrong). Armstrong, like many other scholars, writes, in my interpretation, with a clear agenda of vilifying the lyrics and focusing on value judgment.

Gilbert Rodman approaches Eminem's claim to authenticity from a different perspective, connecting it to cultural politics, and how the moral panic surrounding Eminem is underpinned by "a set of largely unspoken questions about race, identity, authenticity, and performance" (Rodman 95). He comments on how Eminem's achievements as a white artist in a black cultural idiom "challenge dominant social constructions of race in the United States by de- and reconstructing popular understandings of both Whiteness and Blackness" (95).

One argument prominent with Rodman as well as other scholars is how the fact that Eminem's largest following are white suburban youth translates into his own socialization as "black" being transferred to white youth. Hip-hop, the argument goes, did not attract attention from the white upper middle-class when it was solely a black art form "corrupting" only black youth. In Rodman's terms, Eminem is therefore "branded" by white media as "a demon, a deviant, a monster, a *bête noire*<sup>4</sup> – who's all the more *bête* for 'failing' to be *noire*" (111).

On the related topic of racial politics and identity, Jane Stadler discusses the terms "Oreo" and "Topdeck", which refer to a double black cookie with a white cream center and a chocolate bar with a top-coating of white chocolate respectively, but which have come to signify a black person who has internalized white culture or values and a white person who is black underneath due to internalization of black culture (Stadler). Within the paradigm of "Oreo" and "Topdeck", Stadler also discusses in depth the movie archetypes of blacks which are feared by the white upper middle-class, and how blacks embodying white values are denigrated. Eminem, she argues, balances a hybrid identity between black and white which breaks with historical notions of these being mutually exclusive categories. Having grown up moving between black and white Detroit, he has faced oppression both from blacks and whites.

As far as his whiteness goes, Eminem is however not the first white rapper to achieve some degree of commercial success in hip-hop, although he is unquestionably the most successful. Mickey Hess examines hip-hop's imperatives of authenticity through its representations of African-American identity, and looks at how white rappers Vanilla Ice, The Beastie Boys and Eminem employ different strategies to establish hip-hop authenticity, such as "cultural immersion, imitation and inversion of the rags-to-riches success of black rap stars" (Hess 372). Eminem has moreover been termed the Elvis of hip-hop, echoing Elvis

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<sup>4</sup> "Dark beast".

Presley's appropriation of a black music form in the 50s to achieve enormous commercial success, something Eminem also responded to in the song *Without Me*: "Though I'm not the first king of controversy / I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley / to do black music so selfishly / and use it to get myself wealthy"<sup>5</sup>. In Hess' argument, white rappers are initially received as being inherently appropriators of a black music form, and are only successful depending on their ability to stay within the aesthetic tradition established. Eminem, however, breaks with this notion by focusing on his whiteness, and inverts black narratives of suppression in underlining how his own skin color held him back in early years.

Some academic studies focus more on the analyses of particular songs. Elizabeth Keathley, for instance, posits a context for Eminem's arguably most misogynistic songs (*Slim Shady LP*'s "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" and *Marshall Mathers LP*'s "Kim") in that the violence portrayed in them continue traditions of "whiter" aesthetic forms – opera, cinema, and bluegrass murder ballads (Keathley). The songs portray two dark fantasies where a jealous Eminem kills his unfaithful wife Kim. "'97 Bonnie and Clyde"<sup>6</sup> takes place in a car where Eminem dotes on his baby daughter Hailie in the passenger seat, while revealing through the narrative that her mother lies in the luggage room. The prequel "Kim" from *The Marshall Mathers LP* also starts with Eminem doting on Hailie, before suddenly exploding on his wife Kim in anger<sup>7</sup>. As he shouts at her for various transgressions, the chief one being marital infidelity, her eventual murder is described vividly in real-time with authentic background sounds employed to underline the action taking place, like a film noir. While misogyny is certainly not uncommon in hip-hop and should not get a 'free pass', Keathley points out that Eminem's murder ballads are unusual in that they play out within the confines of the private

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<sup>5</sup> This followed up by commenting on attempts to imitate his success: "(Hey!) / There's a concept that works / Twenty million other white rappers emerge / but no matter how many fish in the sea / it'll be so empty without me."

<sup>6</sup> Referencing the in popular culture romanticized outlaw couple Bonnie Elizabeth Parker and Clyde Chestnut Barrow from the time of the Great Depression.

<sup>7</sup> "Baby, you're so precious, da-da's so proud of you – / SIT DOWN BITCH! You move again, I'll beat the shit out of you!"

sphere of home and not on the streets in a violent urban ghetto. In this way, she argues, they more resemble white bourgeois melodrama and thus portray issues of domesticity rather than the harsh reality of the ghetto streets.

Others, like Olav Inge Hjelen in his MA thesis “Marshall Mathers, Eminem and Slim Shady: Vanhellig Treenighet”, apply performance theory to analyze Eminem’s image constructions (Hjelen). His hypothesis is that because a reading of his lyrics as the opinions of one person leads to contradiction and conflict, Eminem should be read as the artist identity of the real life person Marshall Mathers, and Slim Shady again as his character. Hjelen’s main focus is on Eminem’s use of theatricality and performance to play with different ideas and opinions and continually create ambiguity about what he personally means. This is illustrated through two to three songs, each of which Hjelen feels are representative of respectively Marshall Mathers, Eminem and Slim Shady.

In a similar vein, Petter Dyndahl performs an in-depth analysis of Eminem’s song “Stan” in terms of dramaturgy, remediation and mediated presentation (Dyndahl). The song is considered a benchmark in Eminem’s career, and lays out the story of an obsessive fan unable to separate between when Eminem is joking and when he means what he says (“see everything you say is real / and I respect you ‘cause you tell it”, as the lyric goes). Writing letters to Eminem about his life, Stan expresses his love for him and how he tries to emulate Eminem in everything he does, leading him to do drugs, cut his wrists, and actually being physically in-love with his idol. Upon not getting a response on his two last letters, he records an angry message on a tape while he is drunk-driving his car off a bridge with his pregnant girlfriend in the trunk<sup>8</sup>. In the last verse, Eminem finally and studiously responds to Stan’s two first letters, apologizing for being too busy to respond sooner, but also expressing concern

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<sup>8</sup> The song is also rich on intertextuality, referencing a lot of Eminem’s earlier work of both underground and commercial success, among them the song “’97 Bonnie and Clyde”.

about Stan's condition, calling to mind the accident he recently saw on the news, which he then suddenly realizes was Stan. Dyndahl's analysis is partly textual, partly musicological, and considers the immediacy of fan worship, and how this song represents Eminem's view of critics taking his every word at face value while also giving his fans a clear message about not taking him literally.

As sketched above, much has already been written, in general and on Eminem, about hip-hop and politics of race and class, as well as attitudes within hip-hop towards topics such as authenticity, economics and commodification. While the scholarship outlined represent a selection of worthwhile approaches to Eminem's work, most of the scholars seem to focus on specific topics of controversy or mediations in a selection of songs. What is interesting is not only his music on its own terms, as understood from his own experiences, but the many ways listeners receive it. Although no complete sales figures exist to confirm it, it is widely assumed that in general hip-hop's largest group of consumers is white suburban teenagers. This is even more likely the case with Eminem's main audience. It has been argued that the reason for hip-hop's major appeal to white teenagers is its strong sense of identifying with an "Other". Where many white teenagers in modern America grow up in middle-class homes in the seemingly mundane suburbia, the "ghetto real" of the urban neighborhood as mediated through hip-hop offers teenagers (or any listener) a view into the harsh reality of working-class black experience including poverty, gang violence, drugs and shootings. Through their idolization and imitation of the gangsta rapper they get to play with diverse aspects of identity without experiencing first-hand the more real danger of stepping into a racial urban neighborhood. The interesting thing with Eminem in this sense is that racially, he is not an "Other" – he is the same as them.

What then can be grasped culturally from this rapper's immense popularity with white middle-class teenagers, and demonization by both liberal and conservative media? Perhaps

the most pervasive theme in Eminem's work is that of family dysfunction, and this, in addition to the motivating role family struggle plays in his work, is central to a better understanding of his appeal. In the article "Eminem is Right: The Primal Scream of Teenage Music", Mary Eberstadt examines Eminem's work in the context of a line of artists over the last twenty years spanning the genres of rock, grunge, punk and rap who focus on topics of family dysfunction. A characteristic of contemporary teenage music, she writes, is "its compulsive insistence on the damage wrought by broken homes, family dysfunction, checked-out parents, and (especially) absent fathers" (Eberstadt 1). Further, she writes that Eminem, "perhaps more than any other current musical icon [...] returns repeatedly to the same themes that fuel other success stories in contemporary music: parental loss, abandonment, abuse, and subsequent child and adolescent anger, dysfunction and violence (including self-violence)" (4). Eberstadt is not alone in pointing to this recurrent theme in Eminem's work. In an *Observer* review of the film *8 Mile*, chronicling Eminem's journey "From Sinner to Saint", Paul Gilroy says that Eminem is

one of America's more acute social critics right now. He is one of the few voices that is telling the truth about the implosion of white family life in America. Everything he says runs contrary to the all-American mythology of Mom and Pop and the happy children that Bush still propagates. And he speaks directly to all those other kids who are the product of broken homes, domestic violence and parental neglect. Those images are all there in his videos, in the anger of his lyrics. Eminem is the bard of the destruction of the all-American family. (Gilroy Qtd. in O'Hagan)

While Eminem is certainly not alone among musicians in having experienced family dysfunction and social or personal crises, what separates him from other rappers sharing their experience with mainstream America is his explicit address of adolescents as his target

listeners. It is his keying into important emotions among increasingly alienated American youth, and how he expresses this in his music, which I think merits further comment.

In the book “Performing Rites – On the Value of Popular Music”, sociologist Simon Frith discusses the idea of songs as texts, and says concerning rap that “such musical (or poetic) devices as rhythm and rhyme are material ways of organizing and shaping feeling and desire; they offer listeners new ways of performing (and thus changing) everyday life” (Frith 169). Frith further points out that lyrics “let us into songs as stories”, and that “all songs are implied narratives”, before presenting Leon Rosselson’s argument that this implied narrative is “one reason why songs aren’t poems” (169). Song, as Rosselson sees it, is theatre. As he argues, “song, like drama, is about the invention of characters and stories; people – not issues, arguments, slogans, abstractions or soul-searching – are at its centre” (Rosselson 9). In Eminem’s work, the characters must on the one hand be seen as fictions or hyperboles, but there is also an element of art imitating life and Eminem drawing inspiration from his own life for his work. The deeper one delves into his texts, the more of his narratives one finds contained therein, but performing analyses of his entire work is neither feasible nor practical within the scope of this thesis.

Eminem’s music relies on a combination of subversion, shock value, shameless life narration and a public exercise of personal demons to reach an adolescent target audience. What underpins Eminem’s entire artistic project is the ambiguity and paradox set up through his word-play and his almost hypostatic stage personas – Marshall Mathers, Eminem and Slim Shady. As seen, scholars from different disciplines have attempted to dissect the different personas and performance tactics behind them. For instance, Olav Inge Hjelen employs performance theory from theatre studies to break down the distinguishing characteristics of what he in the title of his thesis calls the “Unholy Trinity” (Hjelen). A scholar of autobiography, Katja Lee examines Eminem’s autobiographical postures, and how his

performed selfhoods of Slim Shady, Marshall Mathers and Eminem are “contradictory, malleable, and multiple but also fail to be complete, comprehensive, autonomous or separate” (Lee 357). She further points out how Eminem’s three stage personas give name to his first albums, *The Slim Shady LP*, *The Marshall Mathers LP* and *The Eminem Show*, while at the same time letting all three personas feature on each one, thus refusing the listener focused insight into a single one. Lee further claims that Eminem “offers intentional and calculated ambiguity by rendering the ‘I’ a site of multiple occupations, and we cannot or will not really ‘get it’ if we attempt to dismantle this unholy trinity” (Lee 358). While the focus in works such as Lee’s is on the in-between and the ambiguous, they do not significantly pay attention to how this conscious use of ambiguity relates to rites of passage and especially enactment of *liminality*, and cultural symbols produced therein; she is however onto something with the album titles. When examined more closely, the album titles give clues to a natural division, which interestingly better reflects their dominant themes.

While the use of biographical data to illuminate and highlight aspects of an authorship has been brought into disrepute in certain modes of criticism, the immediacy and pervasive non-privacy of celebrity/fan culture in the media warrants it in the analysis of popular music. Further, just as with authors who have published over longer time spans, analyzing the work of artists who have done the same benefits from dividing the material into early, middle and later periods. This approach seems highly fruitful with Eminem, who, aside from producing and working with artists taken under his wing on record label Shady Records, was mostly on a publishing hiatus from 2005-2008 in terms of solo projects. There is a distinguishable break from his 2005 greatest hits album *Curtain Call: The Hits* to his 2009 comeback solo-album *Relapse* and after. The albums *The Slim Shady LP*, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, *The Eminem Show*, *Encore* and *Curtain Call: The Hits* together form a narrative performance with a marked concept. While the first two titles rely on alliteration for their titling and contain



references to his stage personas, the third album, which gets its title from a hook in the song “Cleanin’ Out My Closet” which goes “it’s my life – I’d like to welcome y’all to the Eminem show”, lacks alliteration, but completes the triad reflecting his personas. The move from the suffix *LP* to *Show* underlines the theater-aspect and theatricality of Eminem’s performance. Clues to them being a staged performance can however be found as early as on the video to the *Slim Shady LP* song “My Name Is”, where a white couple surfing through the TV-channels stop at a channel showing “‘The Slim Shady Show’ - starring Marshall Mathers”. The following album *Encore*, again underlining the theater-aspect, logically revisits dominant themes from the previous albums, but also tries to move on. Finally, as indicated by the title, the album *Curtain Call: The Hits* completes and rounds off the pentalogy. The albums following his publishing hiatus, *Relapse* and *Recovery*, are more centered on his struggle with drug addiction, as well as attempting to re-establish himself and his ground for rapping. As indicated by its title, the album *Relapse* shows a falling back on some of the themes of the previous pentalogy, whereas the album title *Recovery* reflects both on his triumph over the personal crisis of drug addiction and the artistic crisis induced by it and his moving on from the dominant themes before.

In this thesis, I read the phases evoked by the album titles and their dominant themes to correspond to transitions from childhood via adolescence to adulthood. These in turn can be interpreted in light of the three stages of rites of passage, which as we will see reveals clearly an enactment of *separation* and *liminality*, while an eventual *incorporation* becomes postponed as his fame puts him in a permanently *liminal* state. Eminem’s individuation story appeals greatly to a liminal adolescent following, but as “ceremony master” for this group he fails to provide a rite of incorporation, for which his core following must look elsewhere. Eminem’s evocation of rites of passage and experience of family dysfunction in relation to symbols of liminality will be looked at in closer detail, under the topics of childhood,

adulthood and parenthood, related to his relationships to his mother, wife, and daughter.

However, in order to fully appreciate the liminal space Eminem inhabits, an outline of the concept may first be in order.

### 3. Rites of Passage and Liminality

predominately white, predominately black, /  
 well what about me, where does that leave me? /  
*well I guess that I'm between /*  
 predominately both of 'em, /

In 1909, French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep published the work *Rites de Passage*, a work discussing the significance of rites of passage in small-scale societies. Van Gennep posited that these, and in fact all, societies use some form of rites to demarcate transitions from one social status or life phase to another, such as being born, becoming an adult, getting married and dying. According to van Gennep these rites mostly follow a triadic pattern of *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*. In the transition from childhood to adulthood, for instance, a rite of *separation* from childhood is necessary, but *incorporation* as an adult may not be taken for granted, and during the *transition* between them one is on the threshold, no longer a child but not yet an adult. Van Gennep used the term *liminality*, derived from the latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, to discuss the state of being in between two social statuses. The significance of this term was overlooked for a long time until the 1960s when cultural anthropologist Victor Turner came across an English translation of van Gennep published in 1960<sup>9</sup>. Turner rediscovered van Gennep's framework and, realizing its potential, removed it from its "functionalist and structuralist straight-jackets" (Thomassen 14). He took the framework a step further, discussing phases of extended *liminality* as they occur in some small-scale societies, and showed, in Bjørn Thomassen's words, how in such cases "ritual

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<sup>9</sup> Van Gennep entered an academic dispute with sociologist Emile Durkheim who around the same time published a different anthropological work, "the Elementary Forms of Religious Life". Van Gennep accused Durkheim of using erroneous material and lacking critical stance towards his sources. Van Gennep failed to get an academic position and was eventually frozen out of French intellectual life. For more on this, see Bjørn Thomassen.

passages served as moments of creativity that freshened up the societal make-up, and argued [...] that rituals were much more than mere reflections of ‘social order’” (Thomassen 14).

In the essay “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: an Essay in Comparative Symbolology”, Turner gives an outline of van Gennep’s framework as background material, with particular attention to how liminality in small-scale societies is mirrored in post-industrial society (Turner). In certain tribes, he says, liminal initiands have to go through both a symbolic passage of social status as well as a passage in space as they are cast out of their tribe and cut off from normal social interactions until deemed ready to be reintegrated (128). Ritual symbols of this phase, says Turner,

characteristically fall into two types: those of effacement and those of ambiguity or paradox. Hence, in many societies the liminal initiands are often considered to be dark, invisible [...], they are stripped of name and clothing [...]. They are also associated with life and death, male and female, food and excrement, simultaneously, since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life, and being born and growing into new ones. (129)

During liminality then, novices are considered “dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world” (129). Turner draws the important distinction in small-scale societies between sacred and profane, and goes on to explain that in liminality, “profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, the social order may seem to have been turned upside down” (130). Liminality is also related to the sacred, Turner says, as it

may also include subversive and ludic events. The factors of culture are isolated, insofar as it is possible to do this with multivocal symbols [...] that are each susceptible not of a single but of many meanings. Then they may be recombined in numerous, often grotesque ways, grotesque because they are arrayed in terms of

possible rather than experienced combinations – thus a monster disguise may combine human, animal and vegetable features in an ‘unnatural’ way [...]. In other words, in liminality people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them.

Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements. (130-31)

In the same article, Turner quotes Brian Sutton-Smith, a play theorist devoted to the cultural significance of play, who in studying the continuum of *order-disorder* in play says that

we may be disorderly in games [and, I would add, in the liminality of rituals, as well as in such ‘liminoid’ phenomena as charivaris, fiestas, Halloween masking and mumming, etc.] either because we have an overdose of order, and want to let off steam [the ‘conservative’ view of ritual disorder, such as ritual reversals, Saturnalia, and the like], or because we have something to *learn* through being disorderly. (Sutton-Smith qtd. in Turner 131)

Sutton-Smith’s view is highly significant to Turner in seeing liminal situations as “the settings in which new symbols, models, and paradigms arise – as the seedbeds of cultural creativity, in fact” (131). Turner also says, however, that while the new symbols and constructions of liminality in small-scale societies “feed back into the ‘central’ economic and politico-legal domains and arenas”, their functioning is only involved “*within* relatively stable, cyclical, and repetitive systems”. He further says that the term “liminality” properly belongs in small-scale societies, and that “when used of processes, phenomena, and persons in large-scale societies, its use must in the main be metaphorical” (132-3). Seeing similarities between the two, Turner therefore coined the term “liminoid” for discussing symbols of cultural expression in post-industrial societies, as the term “*resembles* without being identical with ‘liminal’” (136).

Comparing the liminal and the liminoid, Turner claims that:

just as when tribesmen make masks, disguise themselves as monsters, heap up disparate ritual symbols, invert or parody profane reality in myths and folktales, so do the genres of industrial leisure, the theater, poetry, novel, ballet, film, sport, rock music, classical music, art, pop art, and so on, *play* with the factors of culture, sometimes assembling them in random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, usually experimental combinations. But they do this in a much more complicated way than in the liminality of tribal initiations. (143)

A defining difference for Turner between the liminal and the liminoid, is that in tribal societies, subversive acts and symbols of liminality are of *obligation*, and breaking of rules has to be done during initiation, whereas the liminoid imitation of liminality in industrial societies is *volitional*. Turner further says that “in the liminoid genres of industrial art, literature, and even science [...], great public stress is laid on the individual innovator, the unique person who dares and opts to create” (146).

While certainly a liminoid genre, hip-hop also shares many traits with what Turner would call liminality “proper”. The term Emcee (Master of Ceremonies) in hip-hop echoes the Master of Ceremonies in tribal initiations, and toasting, ritual insults, and the game the Dozens are all important influences on hip-hop that go back to African oral traditions. Hip-hop, as seen, originated among youths in New York facing several social crises – among these were marginalization in society in spite of attempts at social remedy by the Civil Rights movement, a high unemployment rate caused by the early 1970s recession, especially for those on the verge of adulthood, in addition to whatever individual or communal crises of gang problems and crime waves went on in various ghettos. For the rapper Eminem, in particular, attempts to resolve social experiences of liminality have come to pervade his entire project, ranging from topics revolving around unemployment and economic struggle, race, and especially the disruptive influence of family dysfunction on successful rites of passage.

An example of the crisis of unemployment is seen in the song “Rock Bottom”, which Eminem dedicates to “all the happy people who have real nice lives, and who have no idea what it’s like to be broke as fuck”. In the first verse, he explains why he is so “full of venom and rage / especially when I’m engaged / and my daughter’s down to her last diaper / that’s got my ass hyper”. The second verse describes his gloomy outlook, where Eminem states that

My life is full of promises and broken dreams /  
 Hopin’ things look up, but there ain’t no job openings /  
 I feel discouraged, hungry, and malnourished /  
 living in this house with no furnace, unfurnished /  
 and I’m sick of working dead-end jobs with lame pay /  
 and I’m tired of being hired and fired the same day

His life being full of (unfulfilled) promises and broken dreams, negates the promise contained in the American dream, and underlines the financial difficulties and lack of jobs that so many can relate to. The chorus, repeated twice, describes Eminem’s experience of rock bottom as being “when this life makes you mad enough to kill / [...] / when you want something bad enough to steal / [...] / when you feel like you’ve had it up to here / ‘cause you’re mad enough to scream but you sad enough to tear”. Feelings like these may be universal when facing opposition, but expressing them can be a helpful outlet, instead of doing something rash and breaking the law.

As a white rapper working in a black music genre, Eminem stands somewhere in-between categorical notions of white and black culture. His claims to authenticity have necessitated dealing with how his whiteness gives him a privilege in the publishing industry and with white fans, as well as claims of his success being just another example of white appropriation and theft of black culture. The aspect of race and its influence on Eminem’s

commercial success has been thoroughly dealt with in criticism<sup>10</sup>. Another aspect which has not been that much discussed, is his experience of taking up a liminal position between black and white. On account of his father leaving when Eminem was just a baby, Eminem was raised by a single mother on a single salary, often making it difficult for his mother to pay rent and causing them to move frequently between homes. When he was 14, they moved in with his grandmother in Warren County, Michigan, Detroit's largest suburb. What officially separates urban Detroit from Warren County is 8 Mile Road, the east-west metropolitan street giving its name to Eminem's 2002 semi-biographical movie *8 Mile*, and this street is also strongly tied to liminality.

Warren County, while inhabiting a range of housing from trailer parks to middle-class homes, is predominantly white like most American suburbs, and stands in stark opposition to the black-dominated urban city to its immediate south. During adolescence, Eminem had black friends in urban Detroit, notably DeShaun Dupree Holton, nicknamed Proof, later to be his partner in the hip-hop group D-12 (the Dirty Dozens)<sup>11</sup>. When attending Lincoln Jr. High in Warren County, Eminem would be bullied for having black friends, whereas if he crossed south of 8 Mile Road to meet his black friends, he could face beatings for being white. Along that road, according to Anthony Bozza, there is "a true divide between the classes and the races, and the two sides do not mingle much" (Bozza 253). 8 Mile Road is in this way itself a literal threshold and a symbolically liminal site, being at once marginal to Warren County and Detroit's city centers, but also central when looked at as the line joining and separating blacks and whites, the people living along it having to every day negotiate place, race and class. Having been socialized in a crossing field between white and black, Eminem's hybrid

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance Edward. G. Armstrong, Lindsay R. Calhoun, Marcia A. Dawkins, Mickey Hess, Loren Kajikawa, Katja Lee, Gilbert B. Rodman, Jane Stadler and Ian Verstegen.

<sup>11</sup> DeShaun Dupree Holton – "Proof" – would become his best friend, and later best man in Eminem's marriage to Kim. In 2006, he was shot in what started as a brawl in a Detroit bar. Coming to terms with this loss is a major theme on the album *Recovery* from 2010, which will be detailed later in the text.



personality occupies a liminal space irreconcilable with a predominantly polar view of race in mainstream America, as he comments on in the song “Evil Deeds” from the album *Encore*:

predominately, predominately, /  
 everything’s always predominately /  
 predominately white, predominately black, /  
 well what about me, where does that leave me? /  
 well I guess that I’m between /  
 predominately both of ‘em, /  
 I think if I hear that fuckin word again /  
 I’mma scream. (“Evil Deeds”)

Eminem’s first two commercially successful albums, *The Slim Shady LP* and *The Marshall Mathers LP*, are perhaps the two albums which go the furthest in effacement from society and the use of ludic effects. These albums were central in enacting Eminem’s *separation* from mainstream culture, making him, in Turner’s words, “dead to the social world, but alive to the asocial world” (129). This separation, however, was not wholly volitional and what Turner would call “liminoid”, but also launched by experience of social crises, as seen in “Rock Bottom”. In the book *Angry Blonde*, Eminem talks about the song “Just Don’t Give A Fuck”, a song he wrote while staying at his mother’s house, around the time after his daughter Hailie was born. In Eminem’s words,

all kinds of shit – not being able to provide for my daughter, my living situation, etc., just started building up so much that I just had it. [...] See, I didn’t normally talk about stuff like that. It just wasn’t my usual subject matter. [...] It was so left-field from what I was normally doin’. [...] I soon found myself doing things that I normally didn’t do. Like getting into drugs and drinkin’. [...] Kim and I had Hailie, my producers FBT were just about to give up on me, we weren’t payin’ rent to my moms

[sic], and just a whole bunch of other horrible shit was going on. [...] It was my first real song. It was when I first came up with the whole “Slim Shady” theme. (Eminem *Angry Blonde* 12)

In a move very similar to how Turner describes rites of passage in small-scale societies, Eminem on *The Slim Shady LP* sets up the ambiguity and paradox around his person and opinions which would come to characterize his whole project, and the song “Just Don’t Give A Fuck” goes a long way in doing this. Like liminal initiands in tribal societies, Eminem strips himself of name and clothing, and introduces the character Slim Shady in place of his old stage persona Eminem, itself a spelling out of the initials for his given name Marshall Mathers III (“Slim Shady, Eminem was the old initials”, as the lyrics put it). In the song, he combines both profane and sacred symbols, and connects beasts and monsters to his own person:

Extortion’, snortin’, supportin’ abortion / pathological liar, blowin’ shit out of  
proportion / The looniest, zaniest, spontaneous, sporadic / Impulsive thinker,  
compulsive drinker, addict / Half animal, half man / Dumpin’ your dead body inside of  
a fuckin’ trash can / with more holes than an afghan / [chorus] / Somebody let me out  
this limousine (Hey, let me out!) / I’m a caged demon, onstage screamin’ like Rage  
Against the Machine / I’m convinced I’m a fiend, shootin’ up while this record is  
spinnin’ / Clinically brain-dead, I don’t need a second opinion. (“Just Don’t Give A  
Fuck”)

After a series of descriptions intended to shock, he negates them by describing himself as loony, zany, spontaneous and sporadic. He further carves out a space for himself as both an “impulsive thinker” and a “compulsive drinker”, leaving it up to the audience to ponder whether these word pairs are correlated or mutually exclude one another. In a ludic way, he sets himself up as “half animal, half man”, much like Turner’s description of “a monster

disguise [combining] human, animal and vegetable features” (131), and offers the paradox of announcing himself clinically brain-dead. Songs like these are very characteristic of general boasting in hip-hop, bragging about situations and experiences unlikely to have happened at all, the focus typically being on the lyrical skill and delivery. What Eminem’s text does, however is to, in Turner’s words, array factors of culture “in terms of possible rather than experienced combinations”, echoing the performance of liminal initiands in tribal societies (130).

These tropes as seen in “Just Don’t Give A Fuck” are followed up on “Still Don’t Give A Fuck” on the same album, and “Criminal” on *The Marshall Mathers LP*. In “Still Don’t Give A Fuck” Eminem raps about drunk-driving, smoking dope, stabbing the listener and engaging in gunfights. In the first verse, he announces his spiritual breakdown, saying “my brain’s gone, my soul’s worn, and my spirit is torn / The rest of my body’s still bein’ operated on”. Later in the song, he elaborates on his writing mechanisms, as well as their consequences: “I get imaginative with a mouth full of adjectives, a brain full of adverbs, and a box full of laxatives / Causin’ hospital accidents, God help me before I commit some irresponsible acts again”. In the chorus, he makes a break with the past, and separates himself from both his friends and detractors: “For all the weed that I’ve smoked / Yo, this blunt’s for you / To all the people I’ve offended / Yeah, fuck you too / To all the friends I used to have / yo, I miss my past / but the rest of you assholes / can kiss my ass”. In *Angry Blonde*, Eminem comments on the song, saying that “no matter what you say about me, [...] or what you think of me, [...] I don’t give a fuck” (Eminem *Angry Blonde* 6). Eminem expresses explicitly that he is not one to compromise his artistic integrity by giving in to detractors and letting them influence his project.

On *The Marshall Mathers LP*, he follows up “Still Don’t Give A Fuck” with “Criminal”, one of his most vilified songs. In it, he baits both liberals and conservatives,

taking shots at gays and the President, while boasting about the terrible things he supposedly has done. In the high-pitched nasal voice characteristic of his near-hypostatic alter-ego Slim Shady, he calls out some lines which could easily be the words of a child baiting someone in elementary school: “preacher, preacher, fifth grade teacher / you can’t reach me, my mom can’t neither / you can’t teach me a goddamn thing ‘cause / I watch TV and Comcast cable”. The act of adopting a childish voice to bait people can be indicative of seeing a deeper truth but expressing this knowledge in a way as to escape chastising, characteristic of someone stepping into the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. Right after taking on this childlike voice, Eminem switches back to a normal pitch, points his nose at his detractors and tells them “you ain’t able to stop these thoughts / and you can’t stop me from toppin’ these charts”. Later in the final verse he tells the listener, “don’t ignore me, you won’t avoid me / You can’t miss me, I’m white, blond-haired and my nose is pointy”.

Overall, “Criminal” is a song telling the mainstream media not to take him so seriously, to turn its gaze back on itself, and stop hypocritically blaming him and his work for every societal ill in the country. The chorus calls out the irony of a country celebrating its free speech labeling him a criminal because of his words, and how that in itself won’t stop his continued self-expression: “I’m a CRIMINAL / ‘Cause every time I write a rhyme, these people think it’s a crime / to tell ‘em what’s on my mind – I guess I’m a CRIMINAL / but I don’t gotta say a word, I just flip ‘em the bird / and keep goin’, I don’t take shit from no one”.

What ties the two songs “Still Don’t Give a Fuck” and “Criminal” together structurally are the opening monologues which are both spoken in the same measured voice, with similar breaks and pauses. The first opens as follows:

A lot of people ask me... am I afraid of death... Hell yeah, I’m afraid of death. I don’t want to die yet. A lot of people think... that I worship the devil... that I do all types of... retarded shit. Look, I can’t change the way I think, and I can’t change the way I

am. But if I offended you? Good. ‘Cause I still don’t give a fuck. (“Still Don’t Give A Fuck”)

And the second:

A lot of people ask me... stupid fuckin’ questions. A lot of people think that... what I say on records, or what I talk about on a record, that I actually do in real life, or that I believe in it. Or if I say that I wanna kill somebody, that... I’m actually gonna do it, or that I believe in it. Well shit... if you believe that then I’ll kill you. You know why? ‘Cause I’m a CRIMINAL! (“Criminal”)

The threat from the last line plays on the idea that if you indeed take seriously the words he says, logically you should be afraid, especially by what he is about to express in the song. This is not uttered as a threat to kill people who fail to understand when he is joking, but rather playing with how his words have the power to scare people, an opportunity he will readily take advantage of if people let him. To stand in a liminal position between two social statuses is to be able to see better the complexities of both partially from an outsider’s point of view, which in turn allows for testing the boundaries of what “truths” are absolute and what are relative. In a mode where previously asserted truths become ambiguous, a questioning and potentially re-asserting of them must necessarily follow.

The three songs described above are indicative of a larger pattern in Eminem’s work of using shock value and negation, whether through the connotations of the lyrics or the tone of voice indicating irony. This strategy is important to an understanding of Eminem’s role as a trickster, an embodiment of ambiguity, as in liminality previously taken-for-granted certainties become ambiguous and a questioning of the prevailing social structure is central. However, one of the most dominant themes in Eminem’s music is yet to be explored, an essential part of his work’s connection to liminality, namely his experience of family life and his attempts at processing or resolving not only a dysfunctional childhood and the absence of

his father, but also his complicated relationships to three different females, his mother Debbie Briggs-Mathers, his twice former-wife Kimberley Anne Scott (Kim), and his daughter by Kim, Hailie Jade Mathers. How his familial relationships relate to rites of passage and act as the source of the symbols of liminality found in his work will be discussed in-depth in the following chapters. It is in turn the process of going through liminality which gives rise to the trickstering in his work, to be discussed in the fifth chapter.

#### 4. Eminem's Enactment of Rites of Passage

As we saw, Eminem's early work has many characteristics both of the state of liminality and of symbols produced in liminality, such as the ludic behavior, the playing with the sacred and the profane, and combining familiar elements of culture in obscure ways. Along with his growing popularity however, the ludic playing characteristic of his early albums springs out of and runs parallel to Eminem's focus on familial relationships. An implication in Turner's discussion of rites of passage in small-scale versus post-industrial societies is that in western society, a naturally occurring link between social and biological maturation has been severed by a separation between work and leisure. Eminem's work can be viewed as ways to work out and resolve the lack of or incompleteness of rites of passage to adulthood. As we have seen, a rite of passage to adulthood involves three stages, a pre-liminal *separation* from the previous social status, a stage of *liminality* or transition, and a final stage of post-liminal *incorporation*, or reaggregation. In small-scale societies such as described by Turner, childhood is typically related to parental dependence, and the transitional phase of liminality is the first step towards individuation and self-reliance. *Incorporation* is about reestablished structure and a return to traditional bonds of community on the one hand while maintaining the achieved individuation. In post-industrial societies with more complex and loose social structures, these basic rules break down, and along with them the rites of passage arguably central to individual development.

In many ways, Eminem's representation of his mother Debbie, his ex-wife Kim and his daughter Hailie, and his relation to them, enact traits common to the stages of a tripartite rite of passage to adulthood. Through his portrayals and denigrations of his father and mother, he achieves separation from childhood. Further, it is the personal and social crises in his complex

on-again, off-again, love-hate relationship with Kim, ever in conflict with his growing fame, from which spring the symbols of liminality, the ludic and subversive transgressions in his work. Finally, the songs addressed to his daughter Hailie or those discussing his role as a parent, perhaps his most introspective work, also amend his portrayal of Kim and his relationship to her, reflecting a maturation and a *seeming* incorporation as found in traditional rites of passage. His roles as husband and as father share the fate of being constantly in conflict with his role as artist and celebrity, however, and the trappings of fame postpones establishment of communal bonds and replaces it with a state of isolation in permanent liminality.

As discussed earlier, Eminem's albums are related thematically and chronologically to his experience of family dysfunction. While his early albums focus on resolving a dysfunctional childhood and resentment towards his parents, the later albums show a gradual shift of focus to his early adult life, his dysfunctional relationship to Kim, and increasingly on his relationship to his daughter. The albums examined under this chapter comprise the pentalogy that is *The Slim Shady LP*, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, *The Eminem Show*, *Encore* and *Curtain Call: The Hits*; that is up to his publishing hiatus in 2005. While the *separation* and *liminality* phases of his enactment of a rite of passage are clearer, a rite of *incorporation* related to his role as parent and his maturation is only implied but not resolved. His fame remains a disturbing factor and serves to extend liminality, hindering the final incorporation and maturation which rites of passage in a sense demand.



## Childhood and Separation

“The worst part about the way I grew up was that I never had a real home.”<sup>12</sup>

While different versions<sup>13</sup> exist as to why he did it, all seem to confirm that Eminem’s father, Marshall Bruce Mathers Jr. left him and his mother when Eminem was just a baby. Growing up without a father and being raised by a young mother on single salary or welfare are some of the difficulties Eminem has struggled most with, and which fuel much of his anger on his earliest albums. It is important to note the difference between the real persons and those constructed in Eminem’s work through exaggeration and hyperbole, and that his relationships to his father and his mother as shown through his work are one-sided accounts of subjective experience. Most interesting, however, is how his representation and resolution of these painful relationships enact a *separation* from his childhood mimicking that of a traditional rite of passage to adulthood.

Throughout much of his early work, Eminem throws jibes at his father for leaving, or expresses his resolve to not become like him. The first of these shots at his father comes as a final thought of the song “My Name Is” from *The Slim Shady LP*. Primarily a song introducing the crazy antics of the Slim Shady persona through a catchy repetitive chorus, the final two lines of the last verse reveal Eminem’s deep anger at his father leaving, adding a seemingly casual “by the way, when you see my dad? / Tell him that I slit his throat, in this dream I had”. In the title song “Marshall Mathers” on the album *Marshall Mathers LP*, Eminem comments on how people started acting differently around him after his commercial success, and publicly debunks his father’s and recently discovered half-siblings’ attempts to reconnect with him: “Family fightin’ and fussin’ over who wants to invite me to supper / All

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<sup>12</sup> (Eminem *The Way I Am* 141)

<sup>13</sup> Both his father Marshall Bruce Mathers jr., his mother Debbie Briggs-Mathers, and Eminem’s versions of it have circulated in the media, Eminem being too young to remember but building his insight on a mixture of information from his mother and his paternal grandmother.

of a sudden, I got 90 some cousins (Hey it's me!) / A half-brother and sister who've never seen me / or even bothered to call me until they saw me on TV". On "The Way I Am" from the same album, Eminem uses a comment on the pressure of fame and never being left alone in public as an opportunity to at the same time throw a kick in his father's direction, saying "sometimes I just feel like my father / I hate to be bothered".

On *The Eminem Show*, Eminem vies more attention to his father and the impact of his leaving. In "Cleanin' Out My Closet", he takes the listener back to his childhood, and the impact his father leaving had on him:

I was a baby, maybe I was just a couple of months /  
 My faggot father must have had his panties up in a bunch /  
 'Cause he split – I wonder if he even kissed me goodbye /  
 No I don't, on second thought I just fuckin' wish he would die.

Further, in "Say Goodbye Hollywood", which is an early expression of Eminem's growing desire to retire from the pressure of fame, Eminem also touches on the topic of his father, and his desire to not become like him:

All I know is I don't want to follow in the footsteps of my dad / 'cause I hate him so  
 bad / the worst fear that I had / was growin' up to be like his fuckin' ass.

In his 2008 autobiography, Eminem relinquishes his preoccupations with his father, saying that while he's "always going to have questions about [him]", he has decided he "will never have them answered", and so is "beyond wanting to know the dude" (Eminem *The Way I Am* 141). Through the denigrations of his father in his work and distancing himself from him, Eminem achieves separation from his father and the childhood marked by his absence.

Gradually through his work then, the shots at his father subside. For every line of angry verse he writes about his paternal abandonment, however, there are many more concerning his mother Debbie Briggs-Mathers and what Eminem sees as maternal neglect and poor parenting, characterized by even more elaborate exaggerations. In the song “My Name Is” on *The Slim Shady LP*, he introduces the topic of his mother’s substance abuse, a topic returned to in several songs: “Ninety-nine percent of my life I was lied to / I just found out my mom does more dope than I do (Damn!)”. Later in the same song, he derides her for not feeding him as a baby, with the outrageous and ludic claim that “When I was little I used to get so hungry I would throw fits / ‘How you gonna breast-feed me mom? (WAH!) / You ain’t got no tits! (WAHHH!)”. In “Brain Damage” from the same album, Eminem recounts a real-life situation from junior-high where a fellow pupil called D’Angelo Bailey beat him up and threw him into frozen asphalt, sending him to the hospital with a concussion. Eminem claims in the song to have been subsequently sent home from school, with ludic exaggeration of his mother’s failure to take his injury seriously at first and taking his dizziness for substance abuse: “My mother started screamin, ‘What are you on, drugs?! / Look at you – you’re gettin blood all over my rug!’ (Sorry!) / She beat me over the head with the remote control / opened a hole, and my whole brain fell out of my skull”.

After the commercial success of *The Slim Shady LP*, Eminem faced libel lawsuits from various people he baited in his songs, but the one that hit him closest to home was from his mother, which he comments on in “Marshall Mathers”, adding insult to injury: “My fuckin bitch mom’s suin for ten million / She must want a dollar for every pill I’ve been stealin’”. After *The Marshall Mathers LP*, the songs addressing his mother mostly lack the almost venomous anger, and feel more like forces of habit, with one notable exception. The song most clearly enacting Eminem’s *separation* from his mother and his childhood, is the song “Cleaning out my Closet”, from *The Eminem Show*. Like many of his other songs, it addresses

not just one but several sore spots, including his relationship to his wife Kim, which will be returned to in the next chapter. The chorus, however, clearly marks it as written for Eminem's mother, and goes: "I'm sorry Mama. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to make you cry, but tonight I'm cleanin' out my closet" (repeated twice).

In the last verse of the song, Eminem goes all-out to mark his separation from his dysfunctional childhood, claiming to be a victim of his mother's "Münchausen's syndrome"<sup>14</sup>, and deriding her for her attempts at rectifying the public's image of how she treated him, saying that "what hurts me the most is you won't admit you was wrong / Bitch, do your song / Keep telling yourself that you was a mom". When Eminem was nineteen, his same-age uncle Ronnie, Debbie's younger brother, committed suicide in a fit of depression. Allegedly in an argument later on, Eminem's still grief-stricken and agitated mother raged at him, wishing it was he who had died instead of his uncle. Before launching into the final chorus, Eminem references this argument at the end of the final verse in "Cleaning out my Closet", declaring to his mother: "remember when Ronnie died and you said you wished it was me? / Well guess what, I AM dead – dead to you as can be".

In proclaiming himself dead to his mother this way, Eminem achieves final separation from the key person representing his childhood. The music video<sup>15</sup> for the song adds another dimension to this point. In it, three scenarios or narratives are intercut. One is a child experiencing what the lyrics describe about maternal abuse and neglect, where Eminem appears rapping in the background unremarked by the mother and child. The second scenario shows Eminem sitting and rapping in a church, a place of reflection and confession to emphasize the confessional aspects of the song. In the third scenario, Eminem is standing in

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<sup>14</sup> Münchausen Syndrome is "a psychological and behavioural condition where someone pretends to be ill, or sometimes induces symptoms of illness in themselves". There is also a variant, Munchausen's syndrome by proxy, "in which an individual fabricates or induces illness in a person who is under their care". (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/munchausens-syndrome/Pages/Introduction.aspx>)

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ9\\_TKayu9s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ9_TKayu9s)

emotional agony in rain and thunder with a shovel, filling in a grave the contents of which remain unseen. In the final scene of the video, Eminem exits the church and shuts the door, leaving the camera behind on the inside of the door slowly panning away from it. In the music video then, Eminem again enacts his *separation* from his mother, who represents his childhood. He does this both with the references to the confessions in church, which end in him closing the door with finality, and with the scenes where he is filling in a grave in a symbolic burying of the ties that bind him to his past. Just as in ritual passages in small-scale societies as described by Turner, with Eminem the step into liminality must be accompanied by a figurative death marking off a separation from the stage of childhood.

### **Adulthood and Liminality**

In “Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events”,

Arpad Szakolczai discusses Van Gennep and Turner’s conception of rites of passage.

Szakolczai also focuses on the first stage of a rite of passage, wherein to grow up, a child

“must first go through a painful separation from his family; he literally must die ‘as’ a child”

(Szakolczai 148). The second stage of a rite of passage and a successful passage to adulthood

then, Szakolczai continues, necessitates “the creation of a *tabula rasa*, through the removal of

previously taken-for-granted forms and limits” with the result that “once previous certainties

are removed” and one enters “a delicate, uncertain, malleable state” (Ibid.). It is this stage, the

liminal, which becomes the basis for his discussion of the terms “transition”, “transitory

situations” and “transformative events”. The focus these terms bring to a proper

understanding of liminality is central for shedding light on Eminem’s own enactment of the

liminal stage, and thus warrants a more thorough explanation.

Taking a closer look first at the word “transition”, Szakolczai underlines its implication of a temporary situation, as “little more than a theatrical entr’acte<sup>16</sup>” (156). Using the metaphor of entr’acte, Szakolczai points out how in real life transitory situations “can be quite chaotic, even painful; however, from a ‘stage’ perspective they are trivial, as the ‘solution’ is given in advance” (Ibid.). Moving beyond the terms “transition” and “transitory situations”, he introduces a new angle on liminality offered by the term “transformation”. This term, he says, is in turn an extension of “form” and “formation”, before pointing out the fact that “something can only be ‘trans’-formed if it has already been ‘formed’” (157). Further, he defines a “transformative event” as

Something that happens in real life, whether for an individual, a group, or an entire civilization, that suddenly questions and even cancels previously taken-for-granted certainties, thus forcing people swept away by this storm to reflect upon their experiences, even their entire life, potentially changing not only their conduct of life but their identity. (158)

In Eminem’s case, many transformative events converged over time, many without immediate resolve but later reflected on in his work. Examples would be getting picked on and bullied as a kid, the experience of poverty – both in childhood living with his mother and in young adulthood living with Kim, the constant moving around, and finally the feeling of not completely fitting in neither in an exclusively white nor in a black social environment. All of these experiences are to various degrees dealt with in his work. The most important transformative event in his life, however, is the strain, once he achieved commercial success as a rapper, of balancing the demands on the one hand of being a husband and family man, with those of excessive touring and performing and staying on top of as competitive an art

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<sup>16</sup> The interval between two acts of a play in a theatrical performance.

form as hip-hop was at the time of his breakthrough<sup>17</sup>. From this experience are born most of the symbols so prominent in Eminem's enactment of the stage of liminality.

His experience of living in the interstice of the private and the public domain arguably led to him making choices to the detriment of his relationship to his wife Kim. Most of the songs written on his early albums in which Kim is the subject are one-sided negative songs, written in anger and affect after arguments they had had, or during times when they were broken up. The clearest examples of this are the songs "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" from *The Slim Shady LP* and "Kim" from *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Discussing the song "'97 Bonnie and Clyde", Eminem claims it was written at a time when he and Kim "weren't really seeing eye to eye and whatnot", and where Kim was "using [his] daughter, Hailie, as a weapon against [him]" (Eminem *Angry Blonde* 31). As already mentioned in a different context, this song recounts a fictive monologue to his baby daughter Hailie during a car ride, through which is revealed that Kim is lying dead in the trunk of the car with a slit throat, and that from now on, as the chorus goes, it is "just the two of us". The whole song is delivered in baby-talk, treating serious topics such as spousal homicide and extreme feelings of jealousy in a tone of chilling lightness and humor. The prequel song "Kim" from *The Marshall Mathers LP* ups the ante, a theatrical and chillingly humorless song giving the listener flashing images of a *film noire* recounting the fictional argument between Eminem and Kim preceding the events played out in "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" leading to the murder of Kim. Like with "'97 Bonnie and Clyde", Eminem claims to have written the song "Kim" at a time when they were broken up, recalling "feeling the frustration of us breaking up and having a daughter all in the mix. I really wanted to pour my heart out, but yet, I also wanted to scream. I didn't want to say, 'Baby, I love you, come back to me,' and all that crap. I wanted to fuckin' scream" (78).

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<sup>17</sup> Which it remains today, of course.

The pressure of his public success and its influence on his personal life is perhaps best expressed in the song “The Way I Am” from *The Marshall Mathers LP*. In this song, Eminem rails against the many opinions about him circling in various media, and the pressure of the controversy, the censorship and the libel lawsuits. For Eminem himself, his work seems to be a way to deal with his own personal demons, and in return he then sees himself getting demonized by the dominant media, as he puts it later in the song: “and all of this controversy circles me / and it seems like the media / immediately points a finger at me”. In the end, however, Eminem expresses a dependence on his detractors in order to keep writing, claiming that “I’m glad ‘cause they feed me the fuel that I need for the fire to burn and it’s burnin’ and I have returned” before launching into the chorus:

And I AM whatever you say I AM / If I wasn’t, then why would I say I am /  
 In the paper, the news, every day I am / Radio won’t even play my jam /  
 ‘cause I AM whatever you say I AM / If I wasn’t, then why would I say I am /  
 In the paper, the news, every day I am / I don’t know, it’s just the way I am

The stress on the words “I AM” in contrast to the unstressed “whatever you say” plays with sacred symbolism in revoking the scene in Exodus 3:14, where God, speaking to Moses through the burning bush, identifies himself as “I AM THAT I AM”, except that Eminem exchanges the definite “that” for a resigned “whatever you say”. In doing so, he ironically relinquishes control over his own public persona and gives in to not so much the truth in the various opinions circling about him as the fact that people will have their opinions about him regardless.

Another example of Eminem’s enactment of liminality is seen in the accompanying music video<sup>18</sup> to “The Way I Am”, wherein Eminem starts out standing on the window ledge

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQvteoFiMlg>



of a skyscraper rapping, intercut with scenes of corporate meetings with producers, and scenes of Kim and him trying to play with Hailie on the swing while being approached by fans who now take him as public property. Just after launching into the chorus, Eminem dives from the ledge, taking a figurative jump into celebrity status. Throughout his fall, he continues rapping, intercut with busy scenes from his family life and stage life, along with a rewinding clock expressing the wish to turn back time. From his drop 1:41 into the video, his fall lasts for almost the rest of the song, a metaphor for the limbo his fame puts him in. Finally, 4:53 into the video, he hits the ground, but instead of being crushed, the ground swallows him and cushions the impact, referencing the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, set in a post-apocalyptic world where machines control humanity in a physics-defying virtual reality called the Matrix, an elaborate metaphor for Eminem's feeling of being trapped<sup>19</sup>.

On his third commercial album *The Eminem Show* from 2002, the struggles with balancing a family life and commercial career become more pronounced. A major theme is his trying to deal with his and Kim's 2001 divorce, alternating between admitting fault and scapegoating Kim. As the lyric on "Cleanin' Out My Closet" puts it, he attempted but failed to "make it work with her at least for Hailie's sake. I maybe made some mistakes, but I'm only human – but I'm man enough to face'em today". Similarly, in the song "Saying Goodbye to Hollywood", he regrets his failure to balance a marriage with Kim with the pressure of fame: "I thought I had it all figured out, I did. I thought I was tough enough to stick it out with Kim". In the song "Hailie's Song", celebrating his joy at getting custody over Hailie, Eminem contrasts his feelings for Kim at the time to those for his daughter

Now look, I love my daughter more than life in itself /

But I got a wife that's determined to make my life living hell /

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<sup>19</sup> In the movie, the antagonist Neo must be convinced that the world is not real, only an illusion of the mind, and that given faith and conviction, rules of physics can be bent or even broken. Neo is asked to leap over a chasm from one tall building to the next, but fails and falls because he is unable to free his mind.

But I handle it well, given the circumstances I'm dealt /

So many chances, man, it's too bad – could have had someone else /

On the 2004 album *Encore*, three years after their first divorce, it's clear that Eminem and Kim have attempted again, without success, to make their on-again, off-again relationship work. The song "Puke", while immaturely listing in rhyme the many reasons why Kim makes him puke, also reveals his failed hope at getting back together: "I knew I shouldn't go and get another tattoo / of you on my arm, but what do I go and do? / [...] / I can't believe I went and did this stupid shit again / my next girlfriend, now her name's gotta be Kim". In the song "Crazy in Love" on the same album, Eminem describes how they keep going in and out of a relationship, and expresses his dependence on her not just for his life but for his art:

You are the ink to my paper, what my pen is to my pad /

The moral, the very fiber, the whole substance to my rap /

[...] You're essential to me, you're the air I breathe /

I believe if you ever leave me I'd probably have no reason to be /

You are the Kim to my Marshall, you're the Slim to my Shady /

The Dre<sup>20</sup> to my Eminem, the Alaina<sup>21</sup> to my Hailie /

Perhaps Eminem's most introspective song on *Encore*, the song "Mockingbird"<sup>22</sup> tries to explain and apologize to his daughter for how things turned out between him and Kim: "We did not plan it to be this way, your mother and me / but things have got so bad between us I don't see us ever being together ever again / like we used to be when we was teenagers / but then of course everything always happens for a reason". The second verse shows Eminem

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<sup>20</sup> 'Dre', referring to André Romelle Young, better known as Dr. Dre, Eminem's mentor and producer.

<sup>21</sup> Alaina is Kim's niece, over whom Eminem holds custody. Eminem will also sometimes mention Whitney, Kim's daughter by another man, who also lives with Eminem.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9bCLPwzSC0>

looking back to a time when, despite struggling economically, their relationship was less turbulent, all before his commercial breakthrough:

That's when daddy went to California with his CD /  
 and met Dr. Dre and flew you and mama out to see me /  
 But daddy had to work, you and mama had to leave me /  
 then you started seeing daddy on the TV /  
 and mama didn't like it, and you and Lainnie were too young to understand it /  
 that papa was a rolling stone, mama developed a habit /  
 and it all happened too fast for either one of us to grab it.

Over time the anger expressed so forcefully on the earlier albums changes into feelings of resignation and remorse for the end of their relationship, to a large extent coinciding with his rising fame. As we saw earlier, Eminem expressed surprise early on at what he ended up penning, how his anger and frustration took over. The growing anger can be explained by Szakolczai's conception of transformative events, and significantly how they can "literally and effectively transform the very mode of being of those individuals involved" (158). Szakolczai specifically brings up the example of love as a major transformative event, as something occurring between two people, thus making love itself liminal:

It is not the "I" that loves the "you"; rather, it is the "it", the love itself that emerges in the "in-between" of two human beings, forming and transforming both, by creating a single unit that cannot be separated without a tragedy; a kind of "death". (Szakolczai 158)

The analogy of "death" is descriptive, summing up both Eminem's fictional murder of Kim in the songs "'97 Bonnie and Clyde" and "Kim", his symbolic killing off of their relationship in his works such as "Hailie's Song" and "Puke", an elegy, figuratively, of their dead

relationship in the lines of verse in “Crazy in Love”, and the mourning of a relationship which is past any point of revival, as in the song “Mockingbird”. Another central point of Szakolczai is that in the ambivalence and ambiguity of a liminal state, known structures fall away and if human beings in a liminal state lack models that they can follow, they can easily, he says, “act contrary to what is best for them while not apparently acting contrary to their ‘interests’” (158). The seeming paradox occurs when in liminality a person’s “interests” become difficult to objectively define. Eminem venting his feelings towards Kim in his work seems to have been more detrimental than helpful, which shows itself in the anger on his early albums abating and being replaced by expressions of regret on his later albums as he grows wiser. In some ways, the symbolic death of Kim is also indicative of enacting a rite of *separation* from her as Eminem gives himself over to the liminality of fame.

### **Parenthood and Incorporation**

Alongside the attention to relationship struggles with Kim, there is throughout Eminem’s work an equally strong attention to the worries and joys of being a father. In his early work, baby Hailie is on the one hand used as a character in his music to anger Kim in their arguments, such as when he recorded her baby babble to use in the songs “’97 Bonnie and Clyde” and “Kim”, the songs chronicling the fictional homicide by Eminem on her mother. However, he also uses the same songs to dote heavily on his daughter. In a spoken intro to “’97 Bonnie and Clyde”, Eminem promises Hailie to “always be here for you, no matter what happens. You’re all I got in this world. I would never give you up for nothin’. Nobody in this world is ever gonna keep you from me. I love you”. He likewise dedicates the intro to “Kim” to singing Hailie’s praises: “How did you get so big / Can’t believe it now you’re two / Baby, you’re so precious / Daddy’s so proud of you”. All in all, however, Hailie serves a small part in his work at this point in his career, except as a motivator for success, as seen earlier in the

song “Rock Bottom”, where his economic struggle includes not being able to afford her diapers.

Starting from *The Eminem Show*, Hailie takes on different roles in Eminem’s music. In “Say Goodbye to Hollywood”, Eminem dwells on the pressure success has ultimately put on him, and expresses a desire to end it for good, down to wanting to “swallow a bottle of Tylenol”. Under this pressure, however, Hailie seems to become a grounding force:

I think I’m bottomin’ out, but I’m not about to give up /  
 I gotta get up, thank God, I got a little girl /  
 and I’m a responsible father, so not a lot of good /  
 I’d be to my daughter, layin’ in the bottom of the mud.

On the same album, “Hailie’s Song”, besides being a general profession of love for his daughter, also deals with the topic of fame’s downside, including the seclusion Eminem’s growing fame led to. In the two sung first verses and a rapped third, Eminem reveals his insecurities and personal demons, which let up in the presence of his daughter:

I act like shit don’t faze me, inside it drives me crazy /  
 my insecurities could eat me alive /  
 But then I see my baby, suddenly I’m not crazy /  
 it all makes sense when I look into her eyes /

In the song “Mockingbird” from *Encore*, as seen, Eminem tries to explain and apologize to Hailie for him and Kim breaking up and no longer being together, but it is also a reconfirming that he will always be there for her, and an assertion of how he sees his role as a father. In the first verse, he expresses his desire to shelter Hailie from the worst sides of fame and his personal struggles, but also nears the realization that he is already failing:

I try to keep you sheltered from it but somehow it seems /  
 The harder that I do that the more it backfires on me /  
 All the things growin' up as Daddy, that he had to see /  
 Daddy don't want you to see but you see just as much as he did /

In the chorus, he rewrites the lullaby “Hush, Little Baby” and adapts it to his and Hailie’s living situation, with him having sole custody.

Now hush little baby don't you cry / everything's gonna be alright /  
 stiffen that upper lip up little lady I told ya / daddy's here to hold ya /  
 through the night /  
 I know mommy's not here right now and we don't know why /  
 we feel how we feel inside /  
 it may seem a little crazy / pretty baby /  
 but I promise, mama's gon' be alright.

When Eminem released his album 2005 *Curtain Call: The Hits*, he included three additional new songs, two so-called “party-anthems”, and the song setting up his hiatus as a public artist, “When I’m gone”. In the accompanying music video<sup>23</sup>, Eminem is seen sitting among other members of a support group, where a man acting as a proxy for Eminem stands on a chair and confides to them:

I remember the first time I came here. It's been a rough six years. And I'm just happy to not be that person anymore. And so is my wife. Thank you for letting me do this.  
 That's all I have to share right now.

When the group leader asks if anyone else want to share anything, Eminem steps on the podium, and tells his own story, underlining his guilt at being absent and having caused both

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wYNFgrXTI>

Kim and Hailie a lot of pain by his music and career. Looking back and reflecting on his years of performing, he asks:

What happens when you become the main source of a pain? /

“Daddy, look what I made”, Dad’s gotta go catch a plane /

“Daddy, where’s mommy? I can’t find Mommy, where is she?” /

I don’t know, go play Hailie, baby, Daddy’s busy /

Daddy’s writing this song, this song ain’t gonna write itself /

I’ll give you one underdog<sup>24</sup>, then you gotta swing by yourself /

In the second verse, he recounts a recurring dream where he is telling Hailie he’s done performing, only to have her call him on his lies. Eventually when he’s on stage again performing, he sees Hailie, or an apparition of her, on the first row, accusing him of walking out on her and Kim and evoking severe guilt in him. In the final lines of the third verse, Eminem describes the following scenario, the end to his dream:

I wake up, alarm clock’s ringing, there’s birds singing /

It’s Spring and Hailie’s outside swinging /

I walk up to Kim and kiss her / tell her I miss her /

Hailie just smiles and winks at her little sister.

The scenario he’s describing at the end is his real dream, and his stage life and the pain it has caused his family is what he wishes was merely a nightmare. After all the anger at experiencing a dysfunctional childhood, he comes full circle and sees himself ultimately having given Hailie an experience of the same.

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<sup>24</sup> An “underdog” is when a person pushes the swing high enough so as to make it possible to run under before it swings back.

Over time then there is a mellowing in Eminem's work of the anger about personal issues shifting to guilt and regret, but parallel to his project of venting his emotions in relation to his personal life, individual songs continue playing with ludic exaggeration and reconfiguring cultural symbols in line with his liminal position. Listening to merely one song is to miss his artistic project, whereas his corpus reveals both his struggle with and his reveling in liminality. However unfamiliar the concept may be to the listener, what it denotes is not. While his struggle with fame and desire for a normal family life is expressed through his guilt at being an absentee father and his love for Hailie, incorporation is postponed and the liminality of fame prolonged. In situations of prolonged liminality, Bjørn Thomassen writes, the trickster may emerge as a leader and self-proclaimed master of ceremonies (Thomassen 22). This brings us to Eminem's own role in liminality, namely as a modern-day version of the trickster figure.



## 5. On Slim Shady – Eminem as a Modern-Day Trickster

Most if not all cultures have folklore and myths wherein figures what in anthropology is termed the Trickster. Inherently cunning and deceptive characters, tricksters can be gods, spirits, humans or anthropomorphized animals, usually with a propensity for rule-breaking and clever language, while at the same time performing cultural tasks, such as teaching lessons and imprinting wisdom. The trickster's ways, then, are reminiscent of Sutton-Smith's description of disorder and play as discussed earlier, in that we have "something to learn from being disorderly". Whether a god, spirit, human or animal,

the anthropomorphic nature of the trickster is quite deliberate. The trickster is, by design, a human being in disguise, whose exploits may be highly entertaining to the human members of culture, but, more importantly, constitute discourses on acceptable behavior. Whether he acts in conformity with societal mores or in violation of them, he provides the moralizer with material to make his case. (Owomoyela 477)

One example of the mythological trickster in African folklore is Eshu-Elegbara, a Yoruba<sup>25</sup> deity who acts as a messenger between divinity and humankind. Eshu is, according to Kayode Fanilola,

ambivalent and amoral in his actions. He is the essence of unformed and undirected potentiality; he is regarded as the Yoruba trickster god. He is seen as that part of the divine that tests people. [...] He can create enmity between parents and children, or close friends, or cause a person to misbehave or to act abnormally. (Fanilola 478)

Eshu is also found in much of African-American folklore, primarily indirectly through his derivative the Signifying Monkey. In the book by the same title, Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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<sup>25</sup> The Yoruba people originate from Southwestern Nigeria and the adjoining parts of Benin and Togo, collectively known as Yorubaland.

analyzes the trope of signifying in a variety of African-American folklore. The titular Monkey is a character that appears in many African-American poems and toasts alongside his friends the Lion and the Elephant. In most stories, the Monkey levies an insult at the Lion, allegedly uttered by the Elephant. The Lion then runs off to demand an apology from the Elephant, who refuses and trounces the Lion. Realizing he has been duped, the Lion returns to the Monkey, who then from the safety of a branch brazenly mocks the Lion with clever taunts, both on how he successfully tricked the Lion and how funny the Lion looks beat up. Through the use of explicit insults, the Monkey achieves a veiling of deeper criticism aimed at the Lion's self-proclaimed moniker as "King of the Jungle", whose trouncing at the hands of the Elephant reveals who is the *true* King of the Jungle. Throughout the different tales, the Monkey has many ways of insulting the Lion. A type of insult from the Monkey aimed at the Lion is also common in the Dozens and hip-hop, namely that of targeting close relatives<sup>26</sup>. In one tale, according to Gates, the Monkey

succeeds in reversing the Lion's status by supposedly repeating a series of insults purportedly uttered by the Elephant about the Lion's closest relatives (his wife, his "mama," his "grandmama, too!") These intimations of sexual use, abuse, and violation constitute one well-known and commonly used mode of Signifyin(g). (52)

Gates underlines an important point, however, that "while the insult aspect [...] is important to the tales, linguists have often failed to recognize that insult is not at all central to the nature of Signifyin(g)" (58). While he argues that signifying holds special significance within African-American literature, the practice is not exclusive to this. The term signifying itself can be used to describe the deliberate use of discrepancies between what an utterance – the signifier – usually denotes – the signified – and what it lends itself to figuratively mean. Gates quotes Roger D. Abrahams, who says that signifying

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<sup>26</sup> As seen, Eminem chooses to target own relatives rather than someone else's.

can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. (Abrahams qtd. in Gates 54)<sup>27</sup>

Eminem in his own way cleverly uses word-play and lyrical trickery to create ambivalence and ambiguity around his themes and points, aligning him with the tricksters of folklore such as Eshu and the Signifying Monkey, both of which are also literary tropes which indirectly feed into the origins of hip-hop. Deeply invested in maintaining the ambiguity around his stage personas, he describes *Angry Blonde* (2002), a collection of lyrics with commentary, as “made by Slim Shady, from the mind of Marshall Mathers as seen from Eminem’s point of view. Get it?” (3).

Another insight into the trickster comes from the field of psychology, more specifically C.G. Jung’s conception of psychological archetypes. While the validity of Jungian archetypes in depth psychology and their usefulness in psychotherapy have been debated, they certainly shed interesting light on Eminem’s work and his personas through analogous approach. In his work to sum up Jung’s evolving writings on archetypes, Murray Stein says that Jung’s understanding of the personality is that it is “made up of a cluster of subpersonalities”, which he terms archetypes (Stein 105). He further sets out to explain the two most common archetypes, the persona and the shadow, which are “complementary structures and exist in every developed human psyche” (105-106). Both of these, he says,

are named after concrete objects in the sensate experience. The shadow is the image of ourselves that slides along behind us as we walk towards the light. The persona, its

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<sup>27</sup> Gates discusses the trope of signifying in broad terms, but with a focus on its use in folklore. For analyses of signifying as used in black ghettos, see Roger D. Abrahams.

opposite, is named after the Roman term for an actor's mask. It is the face we wear to meet the social world around us. (106)

The shadow then refers to traits in the psyche that are “shadowy”, generally of “an immoral or at least a disreputable quality, containing features of a person's nature that are contrary to the customs and moral conventions of society” (107). The shadow, Stein says, is the place of “all the cardinal sins”, with the exception of those who have

formed a ‘negative identity’ – those who are proud of their greed and aggressiveness and flaunt such traits in public, while in their hidden shadow side they are sensitive and sentimental. (107-108)

Most people are only to a limited extent in touch with their shadow, whereas the persona is more evident, playing an ever-conscious role of adaptation to the social world. The persona, Stein writes, is the “official and ‘public person’”, a mask taken on to both reveal and conceal an individual's thoughts and feelings (109). The shadow and persona, says Stein, are “a study in contrasts. If one is blond, the other is dark; if one is rational, the other is emotional” (Ibid.).

The shadow and persona archetypes are important when discussing the psychology of the trickster figure, another archetype. Jung posits that “all mythical figures correspond to inner psychic experiences and originally sprang from them”, which in turn explains why most people on some level can relate to them (Jung 195-96). Not only appearing in its original form in myths, Jung further claims, the trickster motif “appears just as naïvely and authentically in the unsuspecting modern man – whenever, in fact, he feels himself at the mercy of annoying ‘accidents’ which thwart his will and his actions with apparently malicious intent” (201-202). In these situations, the trickster appears in “countertendencies in the unconscious, and in certain cases by a sort of second personality, of a puerile and inferior nature” (202). This second personality is the shadow, and Jung held that the trickster is

a collective shadow figure, an epitome of all the inferior traits of character in individuals. And since the individual shadow is never absent as a component of personality, the collective figure can construct itself out of it continually. Not always, of course, as a mythological figure, but, in consequence of the increasing repression and neglect of the original mythologems, as a corresponding projection on other social groups and nations.

Eminem, then, can be seen as a trickster in this sense, representing a modern collective shadow, which addresses not only issues of personal experience, but also collectively shared ones, especially in his target audience of adolescents, which will be returned to later. As seen, Eminem plays with various characters or personas on stage. Of the various stage personas of the artist Eminem, Slim Shady is the one most easily aligned with the trickster, literally evoking the shadow in the last part of the name. Discussing the time after he came up with the Slim Shady persona, Eminem states that:

[T]he more I started writing and the more I slipped into this Slim Shady character, the more it just started becoming me. My true feelings were coming out, and I just needed an outlet to dump them in. I needed some type of persona. I needed an excuse to let go of all this rage, this dark humor, the pain, and the happiness. (Eminem *Angry Blonde* 3)

While Slim Shady is the persona most prevalent in songs discussed earlier such as “Just Don’t Give A Fuck”, “Still Don’t Give A Fuck”, and “Criminal”, Eminem’s effort at remaining ambiguous means that one particular stage persona cannot be fully separated from the real person performing them. Rather, the different personas are better viewed as different facets of a constructed trinity, or as hypostases of the person behind them. Alternatively, one can view his personas as showing different aspects of the artist Eminem through staging, where the

different personas perhaps shed light on different parts of his preoccupations. They can also be seen as masks that hide the performer and offer a disguise to dissuade the viewer/listener from seeing the person behind them, also a common symbol of tribal liminality in small-scale societies as described by Turner. Fittingly, the phenomena of subcultural group followings have also been examined in scholarship under the words *scenes*, areas for staging, and *neo-tribes*, which echo tribalism and rituals in small-scale societies<sup>28</sup>.

While Slim Shady is the persona most clearly inhabiting characteristics of the trickster, the artist Eminem is just as much a trickster through all his personas, masks or hypostases. Where he through one persona, Slim Shady, projects character traits commonly held undesirable, such as the venom and rage on his earlier albums, through another persona, Marshall Mathers, he projects a contrasting sensitive side, in the expression of the hurt of family dysfunction and a wish for a stable life. Who can say at one time which character is the “shadow” and which is the “persona”? Whatever words one uses to describe them, Eminem’s own take on his characters seems to support a notion that they exist as constructions or masks distinguishable from each other on inspection. In his official monograph *The Way I Am* (2008), for instance, he elaborates on the Slim Shady persona in relation to the others, musing that

the line that separates Slim Shady from Em can be really thin. Where does this Shady guy stop and Eminem come in? I think my fans can pretty much tell which one is which, to an extent. And there’s a third thing: When does Slim Shady kick in, when does Eminem step in, where does Marshall begin? Let’s say “Just Don’t Give A Fuck” is Slim Shady. Eminem is “Lose Yourself”<sup>29</sup>, and “Mockingbird” is Marshall. I think those are the most blatant, extreme examples. (36)

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<sup>28</sup> For more, see Hodkinson and Deicke (2007).

<sup>29</sup> from the semi-autobiographical film 8 Mile.

Eminem further suggests a gradual merging, or integration, of the constructed personas in his work, stating that over time, he has created “a balance to it, they’re not as extreme anymore, they’re not as far from each other. Slim, Em, and Marshall are all always in the mix when I’m writing now. I’ve found a way to morph the styles so that it’s sort of all me” (Eminem *The Way I Am* 36).

Like the trickster figure of so many myths, the Slim Shady persona is a vehicle for throwing explicit insults while incorporating deeper veiled criticism, and offers Eminem an opportunity for “self-expression, no matter how lewd the subject matter” (Eminem *Angry Blonde* 3). Hip-Hop as a genre is so subversive, so reliant on hyperbole and exaggeration, that looking for deeper biographical “truths” about who the “real” Eminem is through one or more constructed personas becomes highly difficult, and not all that interesting. Eminem’s need for self-expression eventually grew to be an enactment of the story of his own individuation. What Eminem’s playing with the ambiguous trinity lends itself to in this context is not so much an attempt at isolating and breaking down which opinions “betray” Eminem’s personal opinions, as to what different functions the constructions provide in his work, and for his target audience, a characteristically liminal adolescent following.

In Western society a clearly demarcating rite of passage from childhood to adulthood has to a large extent been exchanged for an extended adolescence with a variety of artificial thresholds such as legal age limits for driving, drinking, voting, and engaging in sexual activity. In addition, a strained economy makes it increasingly difficult to gain a steady income, afford one’s own house and “leave the nest”, all necessary for moving through the liminal phase and becoming an adult. As such, adolescents’ opportunity for proper separation may be taken from them, forcing them to keep living in an artificial stasis incorporating elements both of childhood and adulthood, with shifting emphasis depending on the social situation.

Adolescence may then seemingly take on characteristics of a prolonged or indefinite in-between. In situations of prolonged liminality, as Thomassen wrote, the trickster may emerge as a leader and self-proclaimed master of ceremonies (Thomassen 22). Targeting the liminal group of adolescence, Eminem indeed steps up as a charismatic leader and critiques social issues through transgression, in the vein of the trickster figure of various cultures. This leadership is evoked not just automatically through natural charisma, but just as much through what Turner calls *communitas*, a fostering of bonds in social groups along different lines than the traditional familial or communal. The following subchapter lays out, in more detail, what *communitas* is, and how Eminem's work achieves such fostering of bonds with adolescents.

### **Role Model? Who Knew. Guess there's a Slim Shady in all of us.**

“Now follow me and do exactly as you see!  
Don't you wanna grow up to be just like me?”

Calling it a “modality of human interrelatedness”, Turner sees *communitas* as a major variable in the “anti-structure” of liminality (148). In discussing *communitas* and liminality, Turner calls liminality the “acme of insecurity”, and relates it to “*anomie*, alienation, *angst*” (149), all of which can be seen as hallmarks of adolescence. Turner identifies three distinct forms of *communitas* – *spontaneous*, *ideological*, and *normative* (151). In the “direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities” that is *spontaneous* *communitas*, it becomes important “to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic [...] way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex, or other structural niche” (Ibid). *Normative* *communitas*, which is closest to that experienced within a fan following, is described by Turner as that existing within “a subculture or group which attempts to foster and maintain relationships of spontaneous *communitas* on a more or less permanent basis” (152). An



important feature of *communitas* in Turner's discussion of the concept is that despite being related to the "anti-structure" that is liminality, to protect themselves from the external pressure of structural norms, groups experiencing *communitas* tend to take on a structure of their own. *Communitas* then, Turner says, "may be said to exist more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more 'liberated' way of being socially human" (154). *Communitas* relies on and leads to a sense of group belonging, as is typical for the social bonds formed in adolescence, later to become more dissolved. In the case of Eminem's work and the *communitas* it evokes in an adolescent following, group belonging is created through a mutual sharing of key experiences or feelings that seemingly elude adults.

From early on, Eminem's songs address his supposed status as an idol for kids, typically expressed with an element of irony that he is a bad role model, to the point where kids should not be listening to him. In the song "Role Model" from *The Slim Shady LP*, the nasal voice characteristic of Slim Shady announces: "Okay, I'm going to attempt to drown myself. You can try this at home. You can be just like me!" Like much of the other material on *The Slim Shady LP*, the song is dominated by expressions of anger and exaggerated boasting of criminal actions, with several calls for kids to imitate him: "Every girl I ever went out with has gone lez' / Follow me and do exactly what the song says: / Smoke weed, take pills, drop outta school, kill people and drink". The line "follow me..." also figures in the chorus with various examples of why he is a bad role model:

Now follow me and do exactly what you see /

Don't you wanna grow up to be just like me! /

I slap women and eat 'shrooms, then O.D. /

Now don't you wanna grow up to be just like me!

The song “Role Model” addresses the aspects of kids idolizing Eminem that parents seem most immediately concerned about, such as bad influences of language and playing with ideas that if realized and put into action would break the law, all-the-while deliberately using irony and leading by bad example to achieve a blurring of what is individual artistic performance and what is advocacy of ideas. In the song “Who Knew” from *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Eminem again underlines his position as an artist, creating music for alienated angry kids: “I don’t do black music, I don’t do white music / I make fight music, for high school kids”. Going a step further than “Role Model” in dividing kids and parents, however, the song more directly responds to his detractors and critiques the hypocritical limits of parental responsibility and responsible parenting.

I’m sorry, there must be a mix-up /  
 You want me to fix up lyrics /  
 while the President gets his dick sucked? /  
 Fuck that! Take drugs, rape sluts /  
 Make fun of gay clubs, men who wear makeup /  
 Get aware, wake up, get a sense of humor /  
 Quit tryin’ to censor music, this is for your kid’s amusement /  
 (The Kids!) But don’t blame me when li’l Eric jumps off of the terrace /  
 You shoulda been watchin’ him – apparently you ain’t parents.

In the chorus, Eminem ironically comments on media attempts at claiming his music can effect kids to the point of performing suicide or acting out misogynist violence: “Cause I never knew I, knew I would get this big / I never knew I, knew I’d affect this kid / I never knew I’d, get him to slit his wrist / I never knew I’d, get him to hit this bitch”. In the following verse he criticizes parents for the hypocrisy of crying out against violence in lyrics all-the-while taking their underage kids to see violent Arnold Schwarzenegger-movies.

Eminem asks where is the “guidance – ain’t they got the same moms and dads / who got mad when I asked if they liked violence?<sup>30</sup> / And told me that my tape taught ‘em to swear / What about the makeup you allow your twelve-year-old daughter to wear?” To teach kids right from wrong is not his responsibility, nor is being unambiguous in his message as an artist, when the rest of society is anything but. Hypocrisy is just as ambiguous.

Also from *The Marshall Mathers LP*, “The Real Slim Shady” is perhaps one of Eminem’s best known songs, with a catchy chorus inviting the listener to sing along: “I’m Slim Shady, yes I’m the Real Shady / All you other Slim Shadys are just imitating / so won’t the real Slim Shady please stand up / please stand up, please stand up”. Much like “Role Model” and “Who Knew”, the song criticizes the hypocrisy of mainstream media’s attempts to deflect blame on and subsequently censor rap music, while all media channels contribute to blurring of rules, kids learning what their parents do not want them to know and what they will eventually have to learn anyway. As part of the first verse goes, “that’s the message that we deliver to little kids / and expect them not to know what a woman’s clitoris is / of course they’re gonna know what intercourse is / by the time they hit fourth grade / they got the Discovery Channel, don’t they?” He follows this up in the third verse by suggesting his appeal to kids lies in him being

like a head trip to listen to, ‘cause I’m only giving you /  
things you talk about with your friends inside your living room /  
The only difference is I got the balls to say it in front of y’all /  
and I don’t gotta be false or sugarcoat it at all.

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<sup>30</sup> Referring to the song “My Name Is” on *The Slim Shady LP*, which starts “Hi Kids, do you like violence? Wanna see me stick nine-inch-nails through each one of my eyelids? Wanna copy me and do exactly like I did? Try ‘cid and get fucked up worse than my life is?”

He also responds to criticism from fellow rapper Will Smith<sup>31</sup> and the Grammy nominee board, who, despite praising his verbal skills, vilified his profane lyrics in the media: “Will Smith don’t gotta cuss in his raps to sell records / Well I do, so fuck him and fuck you too! / You think I give a damn about a Grammy? / Half of you critics can’t even stomach me, let alone stand me”. Again he feeds into parents’ fear of their children imitating him, claiming in the second verse that “there’s a million of us just like me / who cuss like me, who just don’t give a fuck like me / who dress like me, walk, talk and act like me / and just might be the next best thing, but not quite me”. In the third verse, he claims that “every single person is a Slim Shady lurkin’ / He could be workin’ at Burger King / Spittin’ on your onion rings / or in the parkin’ lot circling”. After the chorus repeats itself twice, the song ends with the following spoken outro – “Ha-ha. Guess there’s a Slim Shady in all of us. Fuck it, lets all stand up”.

As seen earlier, the use of explicit insults veiling deeper criticism is characteristic of the trickster. In the songs above, Eminem pushes buttons and triggers emotions with offensive language in discussing his position as role model for “kids”, itself a term connoting innocence, instead of his actual adolescent following, who often feel treated like kids. At the same time, he criticizes parents and media for maintaining a double standard with regards to their kids and not what they are allowed to hear so much as from where. While the songs from both *The Slim Shady LP* and *The Marshall Mathers LP* express reluctance at his being a role model, in the song “The Real Slim Shady”, Eminem touches on the powerful idea of there being a Slim Shady, an individual shadow or trickster, in every person. His position as reluctant role model changes from then on through his next album, *The Eminem Show*, where he more explicitly embraces this position and more explicitly addresses the adolescents of white America, wherein he can play to an even stronger degree on *communitas* and thus question the white middle class and the system of norms and values springing out of it.

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<sup>31</sup> Will Smith, also known as The Fresh Prince, was a middle-class rapper who became famous in the 90s for his clean radio-friendly raps.

## “The Spokesman For White America”

“Just look at me like I’m your closest pal,  
The posterchild, the motherfucking spokesman now,  
For WHITE AMERICA...”

In the song “White America”<sup>32</sup> on *The Eminem Show*, Eminem returns to his position as role model, starting the first verse by rapping that he had “never dreamed in a million years I’d see / so many motherfuckin’ people who feel like me / who share the same views and the same exact beliefs / it’s like a fuckin ARMY marchin’ in the back of me.” In 2002, Eminem was at the height of fame, controversy flared around him, and he was involved in several lawsuits and trials. In the song, he claims to never have predicted at the start of his career that his words would have such an impact on people, even to the point of ending up on the political agenda. “I must have struck a chord with somebody up in the office / ‘cause congress keep telling me I ain’t causing nothing but problems”.

The chorus goes on to subvert the inherent values of white America by ironizing over the celebratory white cultural expression, in calling out: “WHITE AMERICA! I could be one of your kids / WHITE AMERICA! Little Eric looks just like this / WHITE AMERICA! Erica loves my shit / I go to TRL<sup>33</sup> – look how many hugs I get!” In the context of the song title, little Eric and Erica, names made of four and five letters respectively in America, are meant to represent generic, American white teenagers<sup>34</sup>, a trope taken a step further in the accompanying music video, which shows a male and female teenager in appearance reminiscent of Eminem who wear t-shirts saying “I AM ERIC” and “I AM ERICA”. This, along with other references to white popular culture in the song, serves to boost Eminem’s position as role model for white adolescents.

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/EminemVEVO#p/search/0/RZlZD0ZfTFg>

<sup>33</sup> TRL – Total Request Live – was an MTV program airing from 1998 to 2008 showing music videos and featuring daily guests, aimed like most MTV programs at a teen demographic.

<sup>34</sup> He also used this trope in “Who Knew”, when he implicitly targeted white parents telling them not to blame him “when lil’ Eric jumps off the terrace / You shoulda been watchin’ him – apparently you ain’t parents”.

In the second verse of “White America” Eminem addresses many critics’ point that because he is white he sells more records than a black rapper would. In his response, he shows he is quite aware of that fact, but treats the topic ironically: “Look at these eyes, baby blue, baby just like yourself / if they were brown Shady lose, Shady sits on the shelf / but Shady’s cute, Shady knew Shady’s dimples would help / make ladies swoon baby (ooh, baby!) Look at my sales!” An implied question is whether his increased sales because he is white reflects more on himself and his own project, or on white America as discriminating consumers.

In the third verse Eminem comes to his main argument that all the attention and sales supposedly connected to his white skin cause people to pay extra attention to his lyrics, as well as his whiteness causing white teenagers to be more susceptible to his arguments: “See the problem is, I speak to suburban kids / who otherwise would of [*sic*] never knew these words exist”. In bringing in the topic of suburbia, he also introduces specifically his position as a role model for suburban kids. Suburban America is the archetypical domain of the white middle class, but as Robert Beuka’s in-depth study shows, post-war views of suburban life have changed from utopia to dystopia (Beuka). Its immaculate conception as a homogenous landscape with owners of similar social stature sharing ideals of community and neighborliness has over time been gradually sidelined for alternative views of the suburban landscape as “a hotbed of conformity; an emasculating, corporate environment; a breeding ground for misdirected and disaffected youths; and a psychologically disabling prison for women” (Beuka 6). Eminem also points out the racial hypocrisy of white America giving hip-hop as a music genre a free pass when it only concerned life in the black ghetto, and later vilifying Eminem for his ability to reach a white adolescent audience. People’s major issues with hip-hop, he suggests, coincided with its mainstream popularity and white parents seeing their kids buying and listening to what was a black cultural form of expression:

Hip-hop was never a problem in Harlem only in Boston /  
 after it bothered the fathers of daughters startin' to blossom /  
 so now I'm catchin the flak from these activists when they're raggin' /  
 acting like I'm the first rapper to smack a bitch or say faggot, shit /  
 Just look at me like I'm your closest pal /  
 the poster child, the motherfuckin' spokesman now for /  
 [Chorus] WHITE AMERICA! [...]

Through his success in one of the most popular music genres in America, combined with his popularity with white adolescents, Eminem sets himself up as the spokesman for white America, addressing topics and issues that concern white adolescents. In the song “Sing for the Moment”<sup>35</sup>, also from *The Eminem Show*, he muses further on how much the issues that concern his target audience cause their parents' dismay:

These ideas are nightmares to white parents /  
 Whose worst fear is a child with dyed hair and who likes earrings /  
 Like whatever they say has no bearing /  
 It's so scary in a house that allows no swearing

This is far from his only song to focus on such ideas, but unlike his previous works mostly concerned with the response to his foul language, “Sing for the Moment” addresses one of the most prominent themes in Eminem's music, namely of family dysfunction and its effect on disaffected kids. “Sing for the Moment” describes a teenager, a problem child turning his anger and hatred to the father who has walked out, and blocks it all out with blaring headphones, giving himself over to the influences of rock and rap:

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/EminemVEVO#p/u/12/D4hAVemuQXY>

His thoughts are whacked, he's mad so he's talking back /  
 talking black, brainwashed from rock and rap /  
 he sags his pants; doo-rags and a stocking cap /  
 his step-father hit him so he socked him back /  
 and broke his nose, his house is a broken home /  
 there's no control, he just lets his emotions go

In the second verse, Eminem further contemplates on rappers' influence on teenagers' thoughts and emotions: "Yet everybody just feels like they can relate / I guess words are a motherfucker, they can be great / or they can degrade; or even worse, they can teach hate / it's like these kids hang on every single statement we make". In contrast to the kids hanging on his every statement stand parents, critics, journalists and prosecutors who attempt to censure and censor him, all-the-while being hypocritical with regards to his celebrity status: "But all their kids be listening to me religiously / so I'm signing CDs while police fingerprint me / they're for the judge's daughter but his grudge is against me".

The wedge driven between his targeted audience of adolescent listeners and their adult parents supports the previous claim that Eminem's work evokes *communitas* with his target audience. This relationship with an adolescent following at the expense of the parents is addressed by Eminem in his songs, as seen in "Who Knew" and "The Real Slim Shady", and further emphasized in the final verse of "Sing for the Moment". There is a demand, both emotionally and commercially, among adolescents for these issues to be addressed in music. It is this demand rappers see, which in turn is why they, as Eminem puts it in "Sing for the Moment":

Sing for these kids who don't have a thing /  
 except for a dream and a fucking rap magazine /



who post pin-up pictures on their walls all day long /  
 idolize their favorite rappers and know all their songs /  
 or for anyone who's ever been through shit in their lives /  
 'til they sit and they cry at night wishing they'd die /  
 'til they throw on a rap record and they sit and they vibe /  
 we're nothing to you – but we're the fucking shit in their eyes.

The difference in how kids and adults receive and relate to his music has also been addressed by Eminem on “My Dad’s Gone Crazy”, wherein he sums up his popularity: “that’s pretty much the gist of it / the parents are pissed but the kids love it”. As seen earlier, Eminem also discusses this point in his autobiography, where he claims that his fans are able to tell the difference between his personas, and when he is joking and not. In a 2001 interview, one of many like it, he says that “a lot of my personal life is reflected in my music and a lot of it is just to get under people’s skin – and it’s worked so far. The kids get me. People in their teens and 20s understand where I’m coming from” (Buck qtd. in Brooks 12). An important point is that to be able to directly relate to the trickstering of Eminem, one cannot oneself be too far removed from a liminal position. Eminem thus speaks to the difference between a younger generation of adolescents and young adults who are still in a liminal stage and an older generation who have completed the phase of incorporation.

The *communitas* that Eminem’s work evokes with his target audience, then, is intricately connected to the trickster aspects of his work, where Eminem becomes a “self-proclaimed leader” and master of ceremonies in the liminality of adolescence. An important aspect of the trickster often not mentioned however, is his didactic function, which in literature is often sidelined for a focus on his crazy antics. Discussing the liminal position and the didactics of the trickster figure in a Native American context, Larry Ellis points out that “[the trickster’s] power is rooted in liminality and he calls it forth merely by expressing his

liminal nature in the outlandish behavior for which he is so well known” (Ellis 57). In a similar vein, Franchot Ballinger emphasizes the social themes and social relationships in the Native American trickster tales, and suggests that “it may be that a view of Trickster as a creative rebel has been emphasized at the expense of the socially didactic function of the Trickster tradition” (Ballinger 15). “[The trickster’s] socially didactic and corrective roles”, he says further, “receive at best passing glances or are made to subserve his role as the creative breaker of taboos” (15-16). Like with the trickster figure of mythology, the focus on Eminem in mainstream media has been censorial and geared toward his transgression rather than his subversion of societal norms, which are certainly not set in stone but negotiated daily.

Writing on the trickster archetype, John Beebe points out how the trickster can show itself in various life stages, in the child testing its limits in relation to parents, in the ambiguous state of adolescence, in mid-life crisis and in old age, however the person being “possessed” in such a way is usually unable to recognize it in himself (36). When the trickster shows itself in a work of art, however, an identification with or rejection of the work of art can accomplish “an unsettling ambivalence, a splitting into two minds” (38). This split, says Beebe, can occur “within a single individual, or between members of a large audience” (Ibid). It is typical of the trickster, in art and in life”, he says, “to split people into warring camps” (Ibid).

As seen in the case of Eminem, his work maintains over time an ambiguity both in terms of his use of signifying and irony and in his various personas used to project and represent different levels of provocation. Playing from early on with spiteful anger both about societal hypocrisy and family dysfunction, especially through the Slim Shady persona, he in his later work amends publically his view on the importance of familial bonds. The persona Marshall Mathers projects introspection and a softer side, whereas all-the-while primarily the persona Eminem testifies to his struggle with fame and treading this line at once of public

rejection and acceptance, carving out a public space with room for at once both vitriolic criticism and biographical emotionality. As Beebe puts it, “containing opposite feelings is what makes being a trickster so difficult. And perhaps the trickster is responding to some cultural bind placed on him” (38).

Ultimately, as Eminem himself puts it, his work is about self-expression, and it is his own individuation story his work is about. His appeal to an adolescent following however springs out of the recognition of a fellow experience of liminality and the ambiguity inherent in such a state. His work being a volitional cultural product and not intrinsic to society, the *communitas* it maintains with his audience must at some point be cut off by other social bonds, and their rite of *incorporation* provided or achieved through other channels. In Eminem’s own story as he enacts it, a liminal state by nature temporary becomes however prolonged and incorporation postponed. His fame, relatable to what Turner calls the *liminoid* imitation of liminality, instead takes on permanence, and this is the subject for the final chapter.



## 6. The Death and Resurrection of Slim Shady: Permanence of the Liminoid

As we saw in chapter three, since Turner elaborated on van Gennep's initial classification of liminality, the term has been developed further. While Turner originally reserved the term "liminality" proper for small-scale societies, it has later been recognized as having much broader implications in many academic disciplines, only some of which have been discussed in this text. What remains interesting, however, is Turner's demarcation between liminality proper, and the term "liminoid" which he coined for discussing more complex symbols of cultural expression in large-scale societies, and as he puts it, "*resembles* without being identical with 'liminal'" (136). To reiterate, Turner points out that "in the liminoid genres of industrial art, literature and even science [...], great public stress is laid on the individual innovator, the unique person who dares and opts to create" (146). Identifying both similarities crucial differences between liminal phenomena and liminoid phenomena, he says that

*Liminoid phenomena may be collective (and when they are so are often derived directly from liminal antecedents), but are more characteristically individual projects, though they often have collective or "mass" effect. (157)*

Liminoid phenomena also tend to be, as Turner puts it, "more idiosyncratic or quirky" than the collective character of liminal phenomena, "to be generated by specific named individuals and in particular groups – schools, circles and coteries [...]. Their symbols are closer to the personal-psychological than to the 'objective-social' typological pole" (158). Apart from liminal phenomena, he says further, liminoid phenomena

*are often parts of social critiques, or even revolutionary manifestoes – books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations. (158)*

According to Turner, in complex modern societies both types coexist in a sort of cultural pluralism. A final important difference Turner uses to demarcate liminal phenomena from liminoid ones within complex societies, is that the liminal is commonly of a form of *obligation*, whereas the liminoid is *volitional* or optional (Ibid). “The liminoid”, he says, “is more like a commodity – indeed often *is* a commodity, which one selects and pays for – than the liminal, which elicits loyalty and is bound up with one’s membership or desired membership in some highly corporate group” (158-159).

With rites of passage, as we saw earlier, there is usually a form of *incorporation* back into society and bonds of community. In Eminem’s work up to *Curtain Call: The Hits*, there is a dreaming of or aiming at *incorporation*, but his career and fame are still obstructing and drawing out his liminality. After his hiatus and drug rehab, however, a gradual change occurs. While the album *Relapse* from 2009 seems very much an attempt at going back to the ludic symbols that garnered his success ten years earlier, one song marks itself off from the others. In “Beautiful”, Eminem reaches out to a core fan base grown both older and distant, to the point of sampling the group Rock Therapy’s song “Reaching Out”:

Lately I’ve been hard to reach, I’ve been too long on my own /  
 Everybody has a private world where they can be alone /  
 Are you calling me? Are you trying to get through? /  
 Are you reaching out for me, like I’m reaching out for you?

In the song, Eminem tells honestly about his feelings of depression, and references instances from his childhood and throughout his whole life of trying to fit in, until he achieved success with rap. The chorus plays on a sharing of experiences, and affirming the message of staying true to oneself. The first verse ends with “you’d have to walk a thousand miles...” before transitioning into the chorus:

In my shoes, just to see what it's like to be me /  
 I'll be you, let's trade shoes just to see what it'd be like to /  
 feel your pain, you feel mine, go inside each other's minds /  
 just to see, what we find, look at shit thru each other's eyes /  
 but don't let'em say you ain't beautiful /  
 they can all get fucked, just stay true to you /

In the accompanying video to “Beautiful”<sup>36</sup>, two fact sheets are shown before the music begins, in complete silence. The first one states that “in 1950, Michigan was 1 of 8 states in America that collectively produced 36% of the world's GNP”, and is followed up by the next: “Detroit was the greatest manufacturing city in the world”. In the main part of the video, as he raps and sings, Eminem walks around in various ruins of and in Detroit<sup>37</sup>. Eminem's focus in this work on his hometown, with its special history of industrial greatness and decline, reflects a greater communal spirit at attempting to reclaim and revive this marginalized city, as for instance portrayed in the recent documentaries “Detroit, ville sauvage” (Tillon) and “Detropia” (Ewing and Grady). His previous leadership and the fostering of *communitas* with his core adolescent following, based on a creation of liminal and subversive symbols born out of alienation and anger, seems now replaced by a more mature fostering of *communitas* with the people of Detroit, based on fellow experience of living in a city on the limen of a figurative survival or death. Herein can be seen a move towards returning to normative structure and an *incorporation*.

On the 2010 album *Recovery*, Eminem broods on the struggle with drug addiction, the solitude and loneliness of his hiatus, and the subsequent depression. In the song “Talkin’ 2

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<sup>36</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgT1AidzRWM>

<sup>37</sup> Among the ruins seen are Michigan Central Station, Detroit's passenger rail depot from 1913 to 1988; the former Packard plant, which produced Packard automobiles from 1899 to 1958; and Tiger Stadium, the home stadium of the Detroit Tigers from 1912 to 1999. Tiger Stadium was demolished over a time period of about a year from 2008 to 2009, footage of which is included in the video to “Beautiful”.

Myself”, he opens by solemnly telling the audience “Ayo, before I start this song, man, I just wanna thank everybody for bein’ so patient, and bearin’ with me over these last couple of years while I figure this shit out”. In the chorus, he calls out to fans and asks the fans: “So why in the world, do I feel so alone? / Nobody but me, I’m on my own / Is there anyone out there, who feels the way I feel? / If there is let me hear just so I know I’m not the only one”. From the same album, the song “Going Through Changes” refers to Eminem’s brush with death after an overdose of pills, leading him to realize he needed help. In the song, Eminem recalls waking up “in the hospital, full of tubes”, and names his best friend Proof, who was shot in a bar brawl in 2006, and his family, as his reasons for hanging on to life:

Wake up in the hospital, full of tubes, but somehow I’m pulling through /  
Swear when I come back I’m a be bulletproof /  
I’m a do it just for Proof, I think I should state a few /  
Facts, cause I may not get a chance again to say the truth.

In the lines following, he thinks about the many things he wanted to express to Hailie and her sisters, as well as his ex-wife Kim, but came close to never getting to say:

There are just too many things to explain /  
when it rains, guess it pours, yes it does, wish there wasn’t any pain /  
but I can’t pretend there ain’t, I ain’t placin’ any blame /  
I ain’t pointin’ fingers, heaven knows I’ve never been a saint /

The song that perhaps most obviously emphasizes Eminem’s “recovery” (as the album is titled) is “Not Afraid”<sup>38</sup>. Like the song “Beautiful”, it is an expression of personal strength as well as a reaching out, with the chorus going:

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5-yKhDd64s>



I'm not afraid, to take a stand /  
 Everybody, come take my hand /  
 We'll walk this road together, through the storm /  
 whatever wether, cold or warm /  
 just lettin' you know that, you're not alone /  
 holler if you feel like you've been down the same road.

In the intro to the song, Eminem is heard saying in between the lines of the chorus: “Yeah, it’s been a ride. I guess I had to... go to that place... to get to this one”. The place he had to go to is not explicitly stated, and can refer both to his drug addiction and rehab, or to the liminal position he has been in. As he puts it next, “now some of you... might still be in that place... if you’re trying to get out... just follow me. I’ll get you there”, he offers his experience and guidance in order to lead the listener out. Later in the song, he announces his return, and his being “married to the game” of rap. Talking about his drug problems, he gives fans part of the credit for his going back to rap:

It was my decision to get clean, I did it for me – admittedly /  
 I probably did it subliminally /  
 for you, so I could come back a brand new me, you helped see me through /  
 and don’t even realize what you did, cause believe me you...

Just as with a rite of *separation* involving a metaphorical death, so a rite of *incorporation* comes with a metaphorical rebirth. In Eminem’s case, the “rebirth” is waking up in the hospital, as an artist, both sober and with new zest, and with a sudden appreciation for his own mortality after processing the loss of Proof. As he puts it in the last track-listing on *Recovery*, a post-burial eulogy or rite of separation called “You’re Never Over”: “If Proof could see me now, I know he’d be proud / Somewhere in me deep down, there’s somethin’ in

me he found / that made him believe in me, now no one can beat me now”. It thus seems Eminem has resolved issues of the past, and is ready to turn over a new leaf. There is however another rebirth, tied to his artistic career as liminoid: this concerns the persona that symbolically died with his hiatus, the Slim Shady persona.

### **The Death, and Resurrection, of Slim Shady**

As we saw earlier, throughout his work Eminem is increasingly preoccupied with his growing fame and the impact it has on his personal life, and this becomes an important aspect in his liminoid imitation of liminality. In the song “Say Goodbye to Hollywood”, he compares himself to “the boy in the bubble, who never could adapt, I’m trapped, if I could go back, I never woulda rapped / I sold my soul to the devil, I’ll never get it back, I just wanna leave this game with level head intact”. Closely tied to his preoccupation with fame is Eminem’s own perception of the Slim Shady persona as becoming all-consuming. For instance, in the beginning of “Without Me” on *The Eminem Show*, Eminem laments the fact that with the advent of the Slim Shady persona, people ceased to show interest in the stories of the personas Eminem and particularly Marshall, claiming that he “created a monster / ‘cause nobody wants to see Marshall no more / they want Shady, I’m chopped liver”. This point is also made in the song “Soldier” from the same album, in the lines: “listen to the sound of me spillin’ my heart through this pen / motherfuckers know I’ll never be Marshall again / Full of controversy until I retire my jersey”. Echoing the previous statement, he adds that his “spilling his heart” through a pen and finding support and demand both for personally emotional and publicly controversial topics means that he can never go back to being his old private self. Discussing Turner’s conceptualizing of the liminoid, Thomassen draws attention to the fact that liminoid experiences are

Optional and do not involve a resolution of a personal crisis or a change of status. The liminoid is a break from normality, a playful as-if experience, but it loses the key feature of liminality: *transition*". (15)

A position of fame or celebrity in modern society, which is based on commercial success in the liminoid play that is cultural creativity, is an inherently either-or position. While involvement in the field of cultural production is optional to begin with, the fame that follows a successful venture is not likely to transition into anything else, and thus becomes permanent.

Musing on the incessant, popular demand for the Slim Shady persona in his music, Eminem claims that for him, Slim Shady "eventually became a metaphor for the trappings of fame" (Eminem *The Way I Am* 37). "I liked having Slim Shady around", he continues, "but he'd become so famous that it had damn near destroyed my family" (Ibid). The exaggerated focus on Slim Shady would however in turn become the reason why Eminem, in his own words, "killed off Slim Shady" (Ibid). Besides songs like "Say Goodbye to Hollywood", this sentiment is most directly expressed in his music through the song "When I'm Gone" from *Curtain Call: The Hits*. In the first verse, Eminem attributes negative qualities, such as his laying hands on Kim, to his possession by the shadow or trickster Slim Shady, and with that realization announces Shady's departure: "That's Slim Shady, yeah baby, Slim Shady's crazy / Shady made me, but tonight Shady's rocka-bye-baby". In the final verse of the song, he figuratively kills off Slim Shady: "I turn around, find a gun on the ground, cock it / Put it to my brain and scream 'Die Shady', and pump it". In killing off Slim Shady, Eminem marks the end of liminality and the beginning of incorporation. As he withdrew from the limelight and figuratively stepped into the shadow, he also succumbed to it. Underestimating the importance of Slim Shady to his writing and his success ("Shady made me", as he acknowledges), Eminem entered a writers' block and succumbed to drug addiction and depression.

However, the killing off of the Slim Shady persona is not the final word. With the album *Relapse* from 2009, *after* his hiatus, Eminem attempts to resurrect and reenergize the old Slim Shady. In the intro to the song “Hello”, Shady formally reintroduces himself to the fans:

Hello (hello) allow me to introduce myself /  
 My name is, Shady, so nice to meet you (so nice to meet you) /  
 it's been a long time, I'm sorry I've been away so long /  
 My name is, Shady, I never meant to leave you (never meant to leave you)

Similarly, in “Crack A Bottle”, he plays with boxing symbolism, and an announcer pronounces: “In this corner: weighing 175 pounds, with a record of 17 rapes, 400 assaults, and 4 murders / the undisputed, most diabolical villain in the world: Slim Shady!” The album *Relapse* is consequently itself very much a literal relapse into the old themes from *The Slim Shady LP* and *The Marshall Mathers LP*, both representing the liminal phase, with frequent use of sexual innuendo, gay-baiting, and the general boasting characteristic of hip-hop.

While *Relapse* got mixed reviews, some very positive and some more mellow, a post-rehab Eminem on the follow-up album *Recovery* from 2010 gives insight into his own opinion of *Relapse*, as well as of *Encore*, the album before *Curtain Call: The Hits* and his subsequent hiatus. On “Talkin’ 2 Myself”, he announces a change in his work:

This time around it's different, them last two albums didn't count /  
*Encore* I was on drugs, *Relapse* I was flushin' 'em out /  
 I've come to make it up to you now no more fuckin' around /  
 I got something to prove to fans cause I feel like I let 'em down”.

On the previously mentioned “Not Afraid”, he again promises the fans real change, repeats the feeling of having let them down, and dismisses *Relapse* as sub-par: “And to the fans, I'll

never let you down again I'm back / I promise to never go back on that promise, in fact / Let's be honest, that last *Relapse* CD was *eeh* / perhaps I ran them accents into the ground / Relax, I ain't going back to that now". In an attempt to reconstitute the bonds of *communitas* from before his hiatus, he on his comeback album *Relapse* tried to return and get back to the symbols that initially fostered *communitas* in an alienated adolescent following. In line with the liminoid that is popular cultural expression, he attempted in a supply-and-demand spirit to anticipate and give the fans what he thought they wanted instead of keeping to individual and authentic self-expression, for which he then apologizes. The Slim Shady persona that ten years earlier established and maintained an adolescent fan group, does not resonate as strongly anymore with a core following that have aged alongside Eminem, and are thus likely in need of different symbols. This is not to say future individual fans may not at some time buy and listen to some of his old work and identify with it, but the mixed reviews of *Relapse* speaks to the necessity of an artistic message evolving with the times.

In the end, Slim Shady remains a metaphor for the trappings of fame, but there's also a shift towards Eminem acknowledging that there is little alternative and that, for better or worse, fame is his reality. In the song "Cold Wind Blows", he illustrates this with the following lines: "How long will I be this way? / Shady until my dying day, 'til I hang up the mic and it's time for me to say / so long 'til then I'll drop the fuckin' bombs". The song that perhaps best illustrates his by now longtime struggle with fame, however, is the song "25 To Life". In the first verse, Eminem raps about someone for whom he sacrificed everything, who took him for granted, and failed to treat him with respect. As the song goes on, he expresses his resolve to leave, despite losing everything in the process: "And I know that if I end this I'll no longer have nothin' left / but you keep treatin' me like a staircase it's time to fuckin' step". At the end of the first verse, he underlines his regret at how things must end: "but a special place for you in my heart I have kept / it's unfortunate, but its..." before the chorus breaks

him off, with a female voice singing “too late for the other side / caught in a chase 25 to life”. In the second verse, he complains that the relationship has become too demanding and time-consuming:

Don't I give you enough of my time? You don't think so, do you? /  
 Jealous when I spend time with the girls, why I'm married to you /  
 Still man I don't know, but tonight I'm servin' you with papers /  
 I'm divorcin' you, go marry someone else and make 'em famous /

Later in the verse, he recalls his friends' asking why he can't just walk away, replying that he's addicted to the pain, the stress and the drama, before concluding that this time over “I ain't changin' my mind, I'm climbin' out this abyss / you're screamin' as I walk out that I'll be missed / but when you spoke of people who meant the most to you, you kept me off your list / Fuck you, hip-hop, I'm leavin' you, my life sentence is served, bitch, and it's just...” before again being cut off by the female voice singing the chorus.

“25 to life” refers to penal codes in some American states less severe than a definitive life sentence without parole. In the song then, Eminem builds on experiences from personal relationships and casts hip-hop in the role of his significant other, as marriage – a dysfunctional one at that – becomes a metaphor for his relationship to his work and fame. Playing with the idea of divorcing hip-hop, Eminem still can't envision anything taking its place, as seen in the first line quoted above. Therefore, he stays with it, hence the metaphor of his fame, which can be said to have been initiated at age 25 with the 1997 release of *The Slim Shady EP*<sup>39</sup>, having become a life sentence.

In the end, his art, while certainly a career, is also a life-style, one constituted by and dependent on his audience. Being all he knows and an addiction, he needs to come back to it

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<sup>39</sup> *The Slim Shady EP* was Eminem's debut EP which garnered the attention of Dr. Dre, who in turn produced *the Slim Shady LP* and became his mentor.

and continue his self-expression. In spite of his attempts at resolving lacking rites of passage and experiences of liminality then, Eminem has become stuck in a permanent liminoid imitation of the liminality that is fame, seemingly to some extent perpetuating his work and giving rise to continued production of liminal symbols. In this way, Eminem's enactment of a rite of incorporation and maturation is complicated and to some extent undermined by the rebirth of Slim Shady. Returning to a point made earlier in the thesis, a central feature of liminoid phenomena, as Turner sees it, is that they "[expose] the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations" (158). Perhaps the continued production of liminal symbols in the liminoid is a logical response to a reality that is itself in some ways permanently stuck with poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other liminal experiences.





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